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# **Torn in Two**

*Vocation and Wholeness in the Poetry of George Herbert, Gerard  
Manley Hopkins and R.S. Thomas*

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A Dissertation submitted to the University of Glasgow for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy

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## Abstract

This is a literary study of the priestly and poetic vocations as they appear in the poetry of the priest-poets George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins and R.S. Thomas. These vocations can pull in contrary directions and this thesis investigates these three men's attempts to live and write though subject to sometimes competing claims. **Chapter One** discusses the possibility of vocation and religious belief in a universe threatened by dislocation. It suggests that religious faith places the priest-poets on the margins, but that their convictions and their vocations can in fact flourish away from the centre. **Chapters Two and Three** then examine how the three poets understand their priestly and poetic vocations. The priest is inevitably a man apart from other men, but Herbert, by stressing his community of faith and his dependence on Christ, calls his people into communion with him around Christ's eucharistic meal which undoes social distinctions. Hopkins, although sundered from mainstream English life by his conversion, nevertheless finds a vital sacramental role as a priest in the alternative Catholic order. Thomas in the twentieth century is less able to escape his isolation and this leads to the nagging feeling that his priestly vocation is pointless. Nevertheless, Christ's experience of isolation and rejection provides him with the example which prevents him from abandoning his priestly service. In **Chapter Three**, Thomas' doctrinal uncertainties are also apparent in his conception of poetry. He sees poetry in religious terms, but its function is largely non-doctrinal and involves keeping the airwaves of the spirit alive against the materialism of his age. In doing so, however, his poetry remains haunted by the Christian imagery of his priestly vocation. Herbert and Hopkins conceive poetry in more overtly Christian terms as a sacrifice of praise to God. For Herbert, this means that all his experiences contribute to a poetry which he places under God's submission. Hopkins attempts to circumscribe what he writes about, initially limiting his poetry to that which praises God by celebrating the inscapes of Christ. This prepares for **Chapter Four's** consideration of the priest-poets' responses to suffering. It is here that the tensions between their two vocations become most apparent. Hopkins' lofty conception of his priestly duty threatens to deny any poetry of suffering. Yet the agonised experience of the terrible sonnets turns his poetic corpus into a priestly activity which, like the priest's eucharistic duties, descends into the dark places of the soul and discovers, however unwillingly, that Christ's inscape is present in broken minds, broken poetry and broken bread. Herbert's communal conception of priesthood means that he turns his struggles of faith into a poetry of pastoral example

which encourages others on the journey of pilgrimage to Christ's banquet. Thomas' Romantic poetic sympathies make his priestly duties seem increasingly outmoded, yet in responding to the degradation of the planet, he combines his roles in a prophetic challenge to the materialism of the age. **Chapter Five** suggests that these vocational tensions experienced by the priest-poet shadow the Christological tensions between Christ's divinity and humanity. In Christ's example, Herbert finds the source for both his vocations, because he is certain that Christ stands behind the call to both poetry and priesthood. This is a more difficult matter for Hopkins whose poetry is forced in terrifying confrontation with Christ to face the terror of the cross. In that confrontation, his poetry, wittingly or not, conveys the Christological and eucharistic agony which holds nonetheless that God is known in suffering as well as joy. Thomas looks primarily through Christ's cross in an attempt to understand the relationship between humanity's suffering and God. Although finally elusive about the nature of this relationship, his poetry treats the cross as a signpost for the reader to follow in the hope that it leads to the unity which priest, poet and prophet seek. For all three priest-poets, Christ's example is hard to follow, and as **Chapter Six** makes clear, it dooms them to the painful role of outsiders in relation to both their traditions. Yet, from this marginal position, they act in their different ways as fools for Christ's sake, scorned by their traditions, but challenging their traditions with the suggestion that the painful and contentious combination of religion and literature is in fact a necessity. For as the priest's eucharistic duties and the poet's linguistic wrestling foretell, the heart of God in Christ can be seen in tension, hurt and breaking. In different ways, the priest-poets' lives and their poetry demonstrate this painful lesson.

# Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Abbreviations	vi
<b>Chapter One — Vocation in a Fragmented World</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction — Priest-Poets and the Decline of Faith	1
Cosmological Incoherence and Religious Order	4
Herbert — the Certainty of Faith	6
Hopkins — the Vocational Leap	13
Thomas — Faith under Fathoms of Darkness	26
Conclusion	37
<b>Chapter Two — On Being a Priest</b>	<b>39</b>
Origins of the Christian Priesthood	39
Herbert's Theological and Historical Context	40
Hopkins' Theological and Social Context	43
Thomas' Theological and Social Context	46
Thomas — the Priesthood of Lonely Perseverance	50
Herbert — the Preparation Within	60
Hopkins — the Heart of the Host, the Heart of the Cosmos	68
Christ, Humiliation and Poetry	77
<b>Chapter Three — The Use of Poetry</b>	<b>80</b>
The Poetic Tradition	80
Herbert — the Poet's Offering	83
Hopkins — the Poetry of Inscape	93
Thomas — Poetic Airways for the Spirit	103
Joyful Submission, Painful Sacrifice and Spiritual Vision	116
<b>Chapter Four — Vocation under Strain</b>	<b>119</b>
The Priest Poet and Suffering	119
Hopkins — the Priest of Gall and Heartburn	119
Herbert — the Parson as Teacher and Guide	134
Thomas — the Ficty Tones of the Prophet	144
The Poetic Liberation of Priestly Vocation	156
<b>Chapter Five — Christology and Vocation</b>	<b>159</b>
The Problem of Christology	159
Hopkins — Christology or Christ?	160
Herbert and the King of Joy and Grief	171
Thomas — the Signpost that Points in Different Directions	181
Conclusion — Priesthood, Poetry and Christ	197

<b>Chapter Six — Conclusion: Fools for Christ's Sake</b>	<b>200</b>
Fools for Christ's Sake	200
Torn in Two	211
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>214</b>

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## Abbreviations

<i>Counterpoint</i>	R.S. Thomas, <i>Counterpoint</i> (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1990)
<i>Echoes</i>	R.S. Thomas, <i>The Echoes Return Slow</i> (London: Macmillan, 1988)
<i>Further Letters</i>	<i>Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins Including his Correspondence with Coventry Patmore</i> , ed. by Claude Collier Abbott, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1956)
Hutchinson	<i>The Works of George Herbert</i> , ed. by F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941)
<i>Journals</i>	<i>The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins</i> , ed. by Humphry House and Graham Storey (London: Oxford University Press, 1959)
MacKenzie (1990)	<i>The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins</i> , ed. Norman H. MacKenzie, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990)
NRSV	<i>The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version. Anglicized Edition</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 1995)
Patrides	<i>The English Poems of George Herbert</i> , ed. C.A. Patrides (London: Dent, 1974)
Phillips	<i>The Oxford Authors: Gerard Manley Hopkins</i> , ed. by Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)
<i>Sermons</i>	<i>The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins</i> , ed. by Christopher Devlin SJ (London: Oxford University Press, 1959)
<i>To Bridges</i>	<i>The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges</i> (London: Oxford University Press, 1935)
<i>To Dixon</i>	<i>The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon</i> , ed. by Claude Collier Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1935)

Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the Bible are from the Authorised Version.

## Chapter One — Vocation in a Fragmented World

### *Introduction — priest-poets and the decline of faith*

There is in English literature an honourable line of poets whose professional lives were spent as ministers of religion. This is far from a monolithic tradition, ranging as it does across the centuries to include Roman Catholics, Anglicans and non-conformists; figures as diverse as Skelton, Southwell, Donne, Traherne, Watts, Keble, Andrew Young and David Scott. This present study focuses on three key priest-poets, George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins and R.S. Thomas. This selection is to some extent arbitrary, but these three men present themselves as particularly suitable for comparison by virtue of a common concern with questions of Christian vocation. More than most, each of them wrestles in his poetry with what it means to be a priest and what it means to be a poet. Doubtless, focusing on different poets would lead to different conclusions, but the time-span which these three men cover suggests that some of the tensions faced by all priest-poets will be reflected in the range of their work.

Indeed, although separated by four centuries, Herbert, Hopkins and R.S. Thomas are united by their poetic struggle with questions of Christian vocation. George Herbert (1593-1633) reportedly considered his volume of posthumous poetry “a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul”.<sup>1</sup> Some of the greatest poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) documents a similar wrestling-match with God during nineteenth century darkness, while R.S. Thomas (1913- ) engages in linguistic combat with the nameless and silent God on the “marches/of vocabulary”.<sup>2</sup> Marked by an insistent honesty that questions God unhesitatingly, all three poets struggle to live out their poetic and priestly vocations in a world which defies attempts at integration.

Yet as George Herbert presses upon the readers of his manual for country parsons, humanity has been created to work, so that “every gift or ability is a talent to be accounted for, and to be improved to our Masters Advantage”.<sup>3</sup> He therefore urges his target readers to press upon their parishioners “the necessity of a vocation”. This reasoning calls the

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<sup>1</sup> Reported in Izaak Walton, ‘The Life of Mr. George Herbert’, in *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems*, ed. by John Tobin (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 265-314 (p. 311). The authenticity of this comment is incapable of proof, although Herbert uses imagery of combat in such poems as ‘Artillery’, ‘Prayer’ (1), and ‘The Cross’. The latter recounts “Much wrestling, many a combat . . .” with God (8).

<sup>2</sup> Hopkins, ‘Carrión Comfort’ (4-8, 12-14), R.S. Thomas, ‘The Combat’ (14-15).

<sup>3</sup> George Herbert, *A Priest to the Temple: Or, the Country Parson: His Character and Rule of Holy Life*, Chapter XXXII, ‘The Parson’s Surveys’, in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. by F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 274.

poet to account as much as the parson, for *every* talent is to be improved upon, and not for its own sake, but for God's service. That indeed is in harmony with the etymology of the word "vocation" which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, originally meant the "particular function or station to which a person is called by God". But what if a person appears to be called to multiple functions? Both Herbert and the dictionary address vocation in the singular. This thesis considers three cases where a person is called to both poetry and the priesthood. It investigates the tensions which Herbert, Hopkins and Thomas experience when trying to integrate their two vocations and the extent to which they are troubled by the question whether the call of the Muse is the same as the call of God.

Merchant warns that the danger in discussing "the 'poet as priest'" is that this can lead away from the poems.<sup>4</sup> Too easily, the priest-poet can be viewed as a saint whose poetry is either applauded but never read,<sup>5</sup> or else prejudged as detached from real human experience. In reality, however, approaching these men's poetry from the shared biographical fact of their ordination creates a way into poetry that is immersed in the messiness of reality. Their wrestling with God is not an academic exercise but occurs in the context of pastoral experience which forces them to engage with the dilemma of human suffering in its sharpest form. Preaching a God of love to a people suffering and dying, the priest is caught squarely in the quandary which Jürgen Moltmann describes: "If there were no God, the world as it is would be all right".<sup>6</sup> Caught between their priestly commitment to the service of God and their experience of suffering, these three poets create poetry whose tension typifies the pastoral poetic tradition.<sup>7</sup>

There is a further danger in this study of trying to squeeze three very different experiences into one uniform mould. In fact, the priest-poets are spread across three different centuries, so that their vocational experiences are shaped by different cultural, social and theological factors. As will become evident, there is an enormous difference between

<sup>4</sup> W. Mochwyn Merchant, *R.S. Thomas* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989), p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert's fate after his death. See C.A. Patrides, 'Introduction' in *George Herbert: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by C.A. Patrides (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 1-53; Elizabeth Clarke, *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: Divinity, and Poetic Met* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 261-264.

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, Keene Lectures, Chelmsford Cathedral, September 1986, p. 33; quoted by Penelope E.A. Gough, 'The Theology of R.S. Thomas' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Nottingham, 1990), p. 392. Compare Thomas' poem 'H'm', where the preacher's attempts to speak about God and love are confounded by the little children with "big bellies and bow/legs" (232).

<sup>7</sup> For the tradition, compare, e.g., David Jasper, 'Two or Three Gathered in His Name: Reflections on the English Pastoral Tradition in Religious Poetry', *Christianity and Literature*, 38 (1988), 19-32.



Herbert's assumption of a Christian culture and Thomas' experience in a decidedly post-Christian era. Nonetheless, the work of all three men is marked by a sense of contingency, the feeling that their faith and their religious vocation seems located in a very fragile order. Even Herbert, writing during the hopeful adolescence of Anglicanism, sensed that the collective faith of England was deteriorating, a trend he expected to continue until "Christ's last coming".<sup>6</sup> This decay of faith is the subject of Thomas' poem 'Resurrections' which views the decline of faith with particular reference to the tradition of the priest-poet. The poem begins with Herbert, suggesting that religious decline is inherent in post-medieval Western Christian experience:

Easier for them, God  
only at the beginning  
of his recession. Blandish him,  
said the times and they did so,  
Herbert, Traherne, walking  
in a garden not yet  
polluted. Music in Donne's  
mind was still polyphonic.

The corners of the spirit waiting  
to be developed, Hopkins  
renewed the endearments  
taming the lion-like presence  
lying against him. What  
happened? Suddenly he was  
gone, leaving love guttering  
in his withdrawal. And scenting  
disaster, as flies are attracted  
to a carcass, far down  
in the subconscious the ghouls  
and the demons we thought  
we had buried for ever resurrected.

As the last priest in this line, Thomas looks back on a tradition of priest-poets which, since the Reformation at least, has *always* struggled against unbelief, against the universe, perhaps even against God. God's recession has, ominously, already begun in the seventeenth century. Thus, although the poem suggests that the nineteenth century was an age of hope, where the "corners of the spirit" were "waiting/to be developed", this hope proves utterly misplaced and disintegrates until the twentieth century poet writes from his own evacuated and haunted subconscious. As the title indicates, any resurrection he experiences is not that of Christ. Instead of bringing forth new life, the priest-poet's order is now strangely empty. That emptiness dominates much of his poetry, leaving him to ponder what place

<sup>6</sup> George Herbert, 'The Church Militant' (229-231). Compare also 'The Priesthood' (32-33), where the Ark shakes "Through th' old sinnes and new doctrines of our land". The New Testament also assumes such a decay — see, for example, 2 Timothy 3.1-7.

his priestly vocation has amidst the vagaries of the world, and what relationship it has to his experience as a poet.

Adjusted as necessary for Herbert and Hopkins, these questions are the major concerns of this thesis. This chapter examines Herbert, Hopkins and Thomas' poetry to determine their understandings of the cosmic order and the place of their vocations within it. Chapters Two and Three consider their respective attitudes to the vocations of priesthood and poetry. The remaining chapters then assess the compatibility of the poetic and priestly tasks. Chapter Four suggests that each priest-poet's poetry combines the tasks in a different way, combatible with a specific vocational task. To varying degrees, those tasks are shaped by the priest-poets' understandings of Christ, and Chapter Five considers how his combination of human and divine natures helps the priest-poet understand and fulfil the claims of his two vocations. The thesis concludes by considering the priest-poet as a type of holy fool, caught between the two worlds of poetry and priesthood, but able in the tension between them to communicate something vital about the nature of God.

### *Cosmological Incoherence and Religious Order*

All this discussion presumes the possibility of belief and vocation in a world which often contradicts the religious convictions to which the three men have pledged their lives. 'Resurrections' surveys a world of increasing incoherence, inimical to the religious stability of the Churches to which they are called. The collapse in view here is the collapse of the medieval, integrated view of the universe about which Welsford writes in her study of fools and folly. She traces the disappearance of this tradition to the decline of the pre-modern order where priest, king and fool survived because people believed that events were interconnected and that symbols possessed vital meanings. For, Welsford writes, priests, kings and fools belong "to the same regime",

... to a society shaped by belief in Divine Order, human inadequacy, efficacious ritual; and there is no real place for [king, priest and fool] in a world increasingly dominated by the notions of the puritan, the scientist, and the captain of industry; for strange as it may seem the fool in cap and bells can only flourish among people who have sacraments, who value symbols as well as tools, and cannot forever survive the decay of faith in divinely imposed authority, the rejection of all taboo and mysterious inspiration.<sup>9</sup>

Welsford's lament is echoed in the writings of the priest-poets. Herbert writes after the Reformation, in a world of 'Decay', complaining that he can no longer "heare great Aarons bell" (10). Reformation leads to Enlightenment so that, in Hopkins, the ghouls of the

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<sup>9</sup> Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber & Faber, 1935), p. 193.

evacuated subconscious (like that of Matthew 12.44, empty and garnished) invade a world swept clean of supernatural significance. This is the world where Thomas lives out his vocations, under the repeated announcement that "Religion is over" ("The Moon in Lley'n" (18)). Drained of its existential significance, a clinical universe has little place for either the poet's symbols<sup>10</sup> or the priest's eucharistic sacraments.<sup>11</sup> When only visible things are heeded and symbols are believed to have no intrinsic connection with realities, both the priest-poet's vocations are seriously threatened.

In despite of this crumbling order, however, the priest continues to write poetry, to preach and administer the sacraments. Although each justifies this activity in different ways, all three find ways of pursuing their vocations despite the absence of any system of regularised order. For, paradoxically, although Christian belief, practice and vocation unravelled as the social and intellectual structures of Christian Europe changed, those structures, as Lovejoy points out, were based on an extraordinary and uneasy marriage of Greek philosophy and Christian belief. "The God of Aristotle", he writes, "had almost nothing in common with the God of the Sermon on the Mount", and yet, strangely and paradoxically, "the philosophical theology of Christendom identified them, and defined the chief end of man as the imitation of both."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, these two conflicting tendencies defined medieval Christian Europe in such a way that rationalism, order, rule and materialism sat alongside supernaturalism, sacramentalism and story. Although the rationalist paradigm asserted ascendancy over its counterpart in the Renaissance, the West remains shaped by these tendencies, so that both are evident in the work of the priest-poets.

Yet, as is appropriate to their respective ages, these streams influence the three priest-poets in markedly different ways. Herbert's poetry is steeped in contemporary scientific theories, but he is also utterly committed to Christian supernaturalism, and he remains largely indifferent to the implications of any clash between these paradigms, (even though his faith forces substantial modifications to the contemporary scientific world-view). Instead, in

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas, for example, considers language "the supreme symbol": R.S. Thomas, "Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*", in *R.S. Thomas: Selected Prose*, ed. by Sandra Anstey, 2nd edn (Bridgend: Seren, 1995), pp. 47-50 (p. 49).

<sup>11</sup> Compare Thomas' "Ritual", in which eucharistic vestments are exchanged for scientific lab coats, ushering in a "ritual beyond words", the sinister "Last Sacrament of the species" (21-22). Other poems attacking science's take-over of language and religion are discussed in Chapters Three, Four and Five.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 5. C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 19 says that pagan cosmology and Christian spirituality were "subtly out of harmony".

poems like 'Vanity' (1), 'Divinitie' and 'The Agonie', he is content to criticise secular attitudes rather than worldly knowledge. Because all truth is God's truth, there is no problem with the world's knowledge. "What hath not man sought out and found,/But his deare God?", as 'Vanity' (1) puts it (22-23). Within one and a half centuries, however, the ascendancy of materialism over supernaturalism threatens Hopkins' contemporaries with despair. The bleak cities and lives of the secularised nineteenth century appear utterly God-forsaken and few desire Hopkins' priestly services, no matter what sacrifices he has made to offer them. Thus, by Thomas' time, post-Kantian scepticism has challenged both paradigms. Neither rationalism nor supernaturalism provides a certain way of viewing the world, which leaves the poet alone in an existential isolation inimical to vocation:

I am alone on the surface  
of a turning planet . . . ('Threshold', 15-16)

### *Herbert — the Certainty of Faith*

The medieval conception that all of life fits into an ordered whole is epitomised in the notion of the Great Chain of Being. This paradigm was presumed by most Western science, philosophy and theology in Herbert's time and indeed well into the eighteenth century. The Chain was based on the principle of plenitude, according to which God's infinity is negated unless every conceivable creature is linked together in proper order by the Chain. The philosophy of the Chain thus leads to an ordered and hierarchical view of the universe, in which all beings are ranged beneath God according to rank.<sup>13</sup> Humanity occupies the frustrating fulcrum in this progression between the angels and the beasts, possessing both angelic and beastly attributes, able to conceive noble ideas and visions but incapable of realising them. This dual nature makes humans the victims of what Lovejoy describes as a "tragi-comic inner discord".<sup>14</sup>

This world-view is axiomatic to Herbert's poetry. The changes ushered in by the Renaissance and the Reformation were to have permanent effects over the following centuries, but in Herbert's time, Welsford's scientist, industrialist and puritan had not yet achieved complete dominance. Consequently, Herbert could embrace Christian belief and simultaneously subscribe to the medieval-Platonic view of the universe. Thus Herbert's poetry is studded with references to Renaissance cosmology, to the four elements and to the place of humanity in the Great Chain of Being. These ideas are rarely his explicit

<sup>13</sup> E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943), chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>14</sup> Lovejoy, pp. 198-199. Man was believed to be "torn by conflicting desires and propensities; as a member of two orders of being at once, he waivers between both, and is not quite at home in either."

subject matter, but they form, as Tillyard says generally of Renaissance literature, the framework on which Herbert's poetry hangs.<sup>15</sup> Yet, although he presumes this order, he is not utterly committed to it. When it conflicts with his experience of God's grace or his own sin, Herbert is prepared to abandon it altogether.

From the beginning, however, *The Temple* presumes God's authoritative control over an ordered universe. "Who lives by rule" advises 'Perirrhantem', "keeps good company", because order is God-ordained (134-138). 'Providence' expands this presumption into an extended meditation on humanity's place in God's creation which is concurrently a song in praise of God's supervision of an ordered world. The poem opens by apostrophising "sacred Providence, who from end to end/Strongly and sweetly movest" (1-2), an address which suggests both the strength and power of God's good government and his tender supervision over the entire range of his plentiful creation. His government is marked by the ideal combination of "power and love" (29) which ensures that all things proceed according to his loving will (32). Nothing escapes God's care because, as the speaker says to him,

Thou art in small things great, not small in any:  
Thy even praise can neither rise, nor fall.  
Thou art in all things one, in each thing many:  
For thou art infinite in one and all. (41-44)

This stanza launches twenty-four stanzas' fulsome description of God's creative design in all the world's animals, plants, stars and minerals. The description concludes, in line with the principle of plenitude, by acknowledging that the simple existence of this variety, ordered according to the strictly gradated principles of the Chain of Being, proves and honours God's infinity. His plentiful ordering of creation lacks nothing, and all creatures fit exactly into their ordained place:

Thy creatures leap not, but expresse a feast,  
Where all the guests sit close, and nothing wants.  
Frogs marry fish and flesh; bats, bird and beast;  
Sponges, non-sense and sense; mines, th' earth & plants. (133-136)

To which it could be added, quite properly, that humans marry angels and beasts. Yet the poem is not primarily about the mechanics of the Chain. Rather, this array of organic order demonstrates God's sovereign glory and recognises that all things "joyn with one advise/To honour" him (146-147). This is Herbert's main concern throughout *The Temple*. In "The Church Militant", God is addressed as he who "Seest and rulest all things ev'n as

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<sup>15</sup> Compare Tillyard, p. v.

one" (2), while 'Praise' (3) describes his supervision of the planet as that of a beneficent monarch:

Thousands of things do thee employ<sup>16</sup>  
In ruling all  
This spacious globe: Angels must have their joy,  
Devils their rod, the sea his shore,  
The windes their stint: and yet when I did call,  
Thou heardst my call, and more. (19-24)

Although these lines are largely in praise of God, such praises slide easily into a consideration of his care for humankind. In extolling God, 'Providence' lists his generous provision for humanity in, for example, glass (101), hedges (122), wool (102), fire (111) and horses (103). 'Man' confirms humanity's unique place as the recipient of God's good creation:

For us the windes do blow;  
The earth doth rest, heav'n move, and fountains flow.  
Nothing we see, but means our good,  
As our *delight*, or as our *treasure*:  
The whole is, either our cupboard of *food*,  
Or cabinet of *pleasure*. (25-30)

'Man's Medley' is explicit that these benefits flow to humanity because of its place in the Chain, and it also draws attention to the spiritual implications of that place. "Man ties" physical nature with angelic life (7-9), "With th' one hand touching heav'n, with th' other earth" (12). The Chain, it appears, is the source of human spirituality.

These extracts, with their wonder at man's place in the face of creation's dazzling variety and their wonder that God cares for the individual speaker, echo the incredulity of Psalm 8.4: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" Yet this reference also introduces an important religious modification to the Chain's framework. For, from a Reformed perspective, human benefits are a gift rather than a matter of right, and they carry responsibilities befitting humanity's spiritual nature. 'Providence', for example, describes Man as the "worlds high Priest" (13), charged with offering God a sacrifice of praise on behalf of the world. Thus, interestingly, the main threat to the order of this cosy, anthropocentric universe comes from Herbert's theological convictions and experiences, not from the tide of rationalism.<sup>17</sup> 'Man's Medley' may attribute human spiritual capacity to humanity's specific place in the Chain, but it is actually human spirituality which threatens Renaissance cosmology and anthropology, in both

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<sup>16</sup> "employ" here probably has the obsolete sense given in the OED, 5c: "To imply, signify".

positive and negative ways. Negatively, the presence of frailty and sin within the world smashes the notion that humanity has a fixed place in the cosmological order. Although Herbert's poems assume that the Chain exists regardless of humanity's fitness for it, their speakers' sin also upsets its order. The speaker of 'Employment' (1), for example, notes that "All things are busie", but his disjunctive rhythm shows that this sense of vocation and industry has passed him by:

only I  
Neither bring hony with the bees,  
Nor flowres to make that, nor the husbandrie  
To water these. (17-20)

This leads to the startling conclusion that he has somehow fallen out of God's arrangement of creation. "I am no link of thy great chain," he says, "all my companie is a weed" (21-22). He can then only plead that God restore him to a place in that order:

Lord place me in thy consort; give one strain  
To my poore reed. (21-24)

The references to music here ("consort", "strain", "reed") re-enforce the speaker's experience of dislocation. He is completely outside the fabric of being, out of harmony, perhaps, with the celestial music of the spheres.

Although 'Employment' (1) is not specific as to the cause of this dislocation, its source is clearly stated elsewhere. 'Miserie' points to sin as the cause of human distress, chastising Man as "a foolish thing, a foolish thing", for having fallen from the garden in Paradise where "Glorie and grace/Did crown his heart and face" (2, 72). Sin's consequences are devastating. Once at home in Paradise, "sinne hath [now] fool'd" man, so that

... he is  
A lump of flesh, without a foot or wing  
To raise him to the glimpse of blisse: (73-75)

In the final lines, the speaker accepts his involvement in humanity's fallen condition. Man, he observes, is "A sick toss'd vessel, dashing on each thing;/Nay his own shelf", before admitting that, because this damning diagnosis applies to all selves, it applies to his own "self" too (76-78). Sin reduces man to a "lump of flesh", quite divorced from his spiritual nature. The entire ordered vision of human affairs is blown "quite away" by one "bosome-sinne" ('Sinne' (1)).

<sup>17</sup> Further examples of a general, God-ordained order are found in such poems as 'The Family', 'Man's Medley', 'The Sacrifice' (7 and throughout), 'Misery' (60). The cosmological structures of the Renaissance are assumed in 'The Search' (6), 'Artillery' (9).

Yet if the Chain's ordered vision overlooks human sinfulness, it equally underestimates the true glory of the human image, which can only be realised through God's gracious intervention. The mention of wings in the closing lines of 'Miserie' hints at the true destiny which God's grace can realise for redeemed humanity. Images of wings and flight are used in 'The Church' to communicate experiences of God's grace,<sup>18</sup> experiences which lift the speaker out of the strictures of the Chain of Being. In the eucharist, particularly, the speaker receives the wing which his sin denied him in 'Miserie'. "Wine becomes a wing at last", and, so he declares in 'The Banquet',

... with it alone I flie  
                                     To the skie:  
 Where I wipe mine eyes, and see  
 What I seek, for what I sue;  
                                     Him I view,  
 Who hath done so much for me. (42-48)

The glory of Christ's passion is that, through it, Christ restores human dignity by overcoming the effects of the fall, but also by transcending the categories imposed by the Great Chain. This is equally evident in 'The Holy Communion'. Adam's pre-lapsarian privileges (in which he could "to heav'n from Paradise go,/As from one room t'another" (35-36)), have been restored to the speaker. Through Christ's grace in the eucharist, the speaker receives this inheritance anew:

Thou hast restored us to this ease  
 By this thy heav'nly blood;  
 Which I can go to, when I please,  
 And leave the earth to their food. (37-40)

Redeemed humanity's true inheritance nullifies the stultifying effects of sin and explodes the limited role which the Chain imposes on humanity, proving the rational vision of secularity too small.

Revolutionary though 'The Invitation' and 'The Holy Communion' are, they merely continue the unsettling message Herbert finds everywhere in the Christian revelation. Using the language of metaphor and paradox, 'The Church' continually discovers reversals and paradoxes in Christian story and experience. Thus heaven's infinity is contained within the pages of Scripture ('The Holy Scriptures' (1) (13-14)), Sundays bring future glories into the present ('Sunday'); the "pole" becomes the tropical "zone" under God's tending ('The Flower' (32)). All these reversals, in turn, stem from the great reversal effected by Christ. In the narrative poems scattered sporadically throughout 'The Church', Christ's appearance is simultaneously joyous and unsettling. The finest of the narrative poems is 'Redemption'

<sup>18</sup> e.g.: 'Easter Wings' (19), 'Whitsunday' (4).



which casts Christ as a noble landlord who, absent from his heavenly manor, is found keeping company with "theeves and murderers" (13). Rather than disguising Christ under layers of allegory or symbolism, the rude shock of the Incarnation is in view from the outset if the reader only has eyes to see. The title and the identification of the speaker as tenant "to a rich Lord" (1) set off biblical and parabolic echoes which alert the reader that the poem is not a simple account of a tenancy dispute. Only one Lord possesses heaven as a manor, and the news that he has departed to take possession of a land which "he had dearly bought/Long since on earth" (7-8) make clear that the poem concerns Christ's incarnation and redeeming work. Even then, however, the speaker's delusions persist because he continues to view the matter from a worldly perspective. In terms of the cosmic hierarchy, a Lord who dwells in a heavenly manor *should*, as the speaker assumes, be sought in places befitting his status, "in great resorts;/In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts" (10-11). The speaker is, after all, dealing with the Lord God of Hosts, whose chariot is the clouds, who walks upon the wings of the wind,<sup>19</sup> and who naturally sits supreme at the top of the Great Chain of Being. Yet the speaker's impeccable human logic fails to discover the true character of his Lord. The heavenly landlord is found in locations less reputable than *The Boar's Head*, in the company of characters more malevolent than Falstaff, characters who are apparently responsible for his stunning death which closes the poem and dumbfounds the speaker. The poem leaves the reader, as Strier says, with a sense of

... the strangeness of Christianity, its affronting of natural reason and common sense. When natural reason conceives of God, it can only do so in terms of majesty and power — on the analogy, indeed, of earthly lords. The conception of the most glorious and powerful Being in the universe, the King of Kings, dying a humiliating death among "theeves and murderers" violates decorum in a fundamental way.<sup>20</sup>

Yet Christianity is not about decorum, and in Herbert's world, this deals a crucial blow to the clipped certainties of rationalism. In an epistemology based on faith and open to infusions of divine grace, the Chain is extremely fragile and becomes one example of the failure of "natural reason" to comprehend God.<sup>21</sup> This clears room for the priestly vocation, for this is exactly the domain in which the priest operates. Even the slightly naive speaker of "The Priesthood" knows that the priest possesses the keys of heaven and hell<sup>22</sup> and so is charged with dealing in the strange Christian reversals. As deputy to Christ,

<sup>19</sup> Compare Psalm 104.3.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> Compare the discussion of Scotist, Augustinian and Thomist epistemology in Hywel Thomas, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Duns Scotus', *Religious Studies*, 24 (1988), 337-364 (p. 354).

<sup>22</sup> Lines 21-22. This poem is discussed further below in Chapter Two.

the Lord of indecorous reversals, the priest can lift "to the sky" and throw "down to hell" (2-3). He stands altogether outside human understandings of order and hierarchy and his duties provide further evidence that Christ's way unsettles the most logical systems.

Further paradoxes inherent in the priestly vocation are evident in the figures of the priests themselves. The speaker is unworthy to operate the keys of St. Peter, but God, true to the reversals of the Incarnation, raises individuals to that task, making "lowly matter" suitable for "high uses" (35). God's overriding rule, manifested here in the issue of priestly vocation, is that of the Sermon of the Mount:

... the poore do by submission  
What pride by opposition. (41-42)

God's nonsensical hierarchy is characterised by humility, by peacemakers and the merciful. Those who humble themselves by renouncing pretensions to status and merit can contribute to God's glory, for in God's paradoxical economy, foolishness and wisdom are reversed (1 Corinthians 1.18-29). The eucharist seals this ridiculous elevation of unworthy people to the priesthood. In it, God "vouchsafeth to become our fare" (27), thereby confirming the inversions of incarnation and resurrection. As Herbert understands God's economy, therefore, his vocations can operate, but they do so outside the regimented hierarchy and order which characterise the Great Chain of Being. Herbert's ultimate certainty lies in the spiritual world, where his faith acts as an epicycle modifying the rigid scientific world-view of his age. Like the "new spheres" of Donne's Holy Sonnet V, Herbert's theology envelops that world-view to explain its anomalies and to defend the possibility of vocation. From below, the experience of sin explains why Herbert often feels himself askew in humanity's ordained place in the cosmic hierarchy. Equally, from above, Herbert's belief about humanity's true destiny explains why God's grace can lift him out of the structured hierarchy into heaven. It also explains why, despite humanity's fixed place in the Chain, priests can nevertheless deal with matters far above their purview. In the final analysis, his personal knowledge of God always takes precedence over the wisdom of his age.

Then burn thy Epicycles, foolish man;  
Break all thy spheres, and save thy head.  
Faith needs no staff of flesh, but stoutly can  
To heav'n alone both go, and leade. ('Divinitie', 25-28)

For Herbert, therefore, a vocation is a calling by the God of reversals and inversions to live under his delightful and freeing incoherence, where he can experience God's grace unravelling the effects of sin and setting him leaping into the courts of heaven. The

speaker therefore inhabits two worlds at once: the rational and ordered world which is always threatened with collapse, and the spiritual world which operates according to the dynamics of grace and forgiveness. Herbert's vocational struggles, as the following chapters discuss, flow largely from this dual citizenship.

### *Hopkins — the Vocational Leap*

Herbert's world-view, therefore, combines the ordered structures of Renaissance cosmology with the delightful, releasing incoherence wrought by the gracious activity of God. Yet in the years between the Renaissance and the nineteenth century, any stability provided by the cosmological assumptions of Herbert and his contemporaries had been in steady decline. Prickett notes that

until some time in the middle of the eighteenth century it was possible for a great many people to believe (however falsely) that they lived in a world dominated by great unchangeable permanencies — in agriculture, in the means of production, in religion, in social and political relationships. By 1820 it was impossible to think in this way.<sup>23</sup>

Hopkins inherits a world in which industrialisation, the higher criticism, the findings of geology, Darwinism and sceptical philosophy have replaced the stable certainties of a structured, hierarchical cosmos with an unnerving sense of change and flux. The world of Tennyson's 'In Memoriam' is an age-old, strange and fearful planet, bearing the influence of Charles Lyell's geological researches, where streams "Draw down æonian hills, and sow/The dust of continents to be" and hills are shadows which "flow/From form to form". It is, in line with the speculations of Robert Chambers and in anticipation of Darwin's theory of evolution, a world where Nature is "red in tooth and claw".<sup>24</sup> This is only dimly recognisable as Herbert's planet, custom-built to house humanity.

Alongside these changes in understandings of the natural world, the march of industrialisation wrought immense changes in social structures and institutions. This is the familiar story of growth in the manufacturing sector, of exploding cities, increased social stratification and population boom.<sup>25</sup> Intellectual changes were matched by "economic fluctuation, instability and social insecurity", the "transformation of social relationships, away from the interdependence of status and traditional hierarchy towards the more

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Prickett, 'Introduction', in *The Romantics*, ed. by Stephen Prickett (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> Tennyson, 'In Memoriam', 35, 123, 56.

anonymous connections of an urbanized, commercial society".<sup>26</sup> Hopkins laments the ecological costs of these changes in 'God's Grandeur', where all is "seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil" (6). Compounding the sense of the age's uncertainty was the fact that all this change happened at such enormous speed.<sup>27</sup> Tennyson again provides evidence of this unrest, as in his 'Locksley Hall' where there is doubt rather than enjoyment in the "march of mind,/In the steamship" and "the railway" and "the thoughts that shake mankind" (165-166).<sup>28</sup> Similar misgivings are voiced throughout nineteenth century literature,<sup>29</sup> and Hopkins had first-hand experience of this degradation during his parish work in the industrial north, experience which led him to remark on "the hollowness of this century's civilisation".<sup>30</sup>

One response to this sense of change and flux can be found in the work of Walter Pater, for a time Hopkins' tutor at Oxford. Pater comments on the tendency in contemporary thought to regard "all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions"<sup>31</sup> and it is against this background that he propagates his famous aesthetic creed in which "experience itself is the end" of life. To deal with this universal experience of flux, Pater counselled that "What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions", cramming "as many pulsations as possible" into the short span of individual life.<sup>32</sup> Despite having Pater as his tutor, Hopkins' response to the nineteenth century maelstrom is rather different from Pater's. Although on one hand his work founders in despair when confronted with the disorder which threatens to deprive everything of meaning and hope, he never surrenders to the idea of the individual

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Barry Supple, 'Material Development: the Condition of England 1830-1860', in *The Victorians*, ed. by Laurence Lerner (London: Methuen, 1978), pp. 49-69, (pp. 51, 55, 58). The population of Britain, for example, increased by over 200% between 1785 and 1851 (p. 51).

<sup>26</sup> Supple, pp. 56, 63.

<sup>27</sup> "It has all been so sudden" - W. Cooke Taylor, *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire* (1842), quoted in David Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture* (London: John Murray, 1997), pp. 20-21. Compare Supple, p. 62.

<sup>28</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Locksley Hall', lines 140-141, 165-166. The speaker of this poem concludes by seeking to embrace the future promised by the new discoveries and industries, although his resolve to face the future fearlessly, to "Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change" (182) is not completely convincing.

<sup>29</sup> Compare Dickens' *Hard Times* and the general phenomenon of the "social" novel, including Mrs Gaskell's *North and South*, Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* and Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke*. See, e.g., Raymond Chapman, *The Victorian Debate* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), Chapter 8, 'The Social and Political Novel'.

<sup>30</sup> To Dixon, p. 97 (1 December 1881). See below, Chapter Two.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Pater, 'Conclusion to *The Renaissance*' (1873), in *Walter Pater: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by Jennifer Uglow (London: Dent, 1973), pp. 39-41, (p. 39).

<sup>32</sup> Pater, pp. 40, 41.

responding to unmitigated flux by pursuing sensory experience for the experience's sake.<sup>33</sup> Rather, much of his work craves coherence and order against a fear of disorder and "sordidness",<sup>34</sup> launching a desperate, decisive affirmation that cosmic and personal coherence are possible in and through Christ. These opposed tendencies exist concurrently in Hopkins' mind so that, while much of the poetry which survives from the 1860s is marked by images of sterility and desperation, the post-conversion poetry of the 1870s and early 1880s displays an affirmative hope in Christ as the one in whom dissolution and flux can be overcome.<sup>35</sup> Only later do despair and darkness return in the terrible sonnets of the mid-1880s.<sup>36</sup> In this movement, poised between despair and triumph, Hopkins discovers that his call is made to him as an individual. In the uncertain depths of individual experience, amidst the flux and degradation of contemporary life, he discovers that everything he does must come from Christ.

The most quoted of the early poems of despair, 'Nondum', sets out a vision of the world drained of all spiritual significance. Although "the glories of the earth" are clearly visible (7) and clearly attributed to God's originating creative activity (his is "the hand that wrought them all" (8)), God seems now to have vacated his world. Creation is "Vacant" (12), and its lamps can only appal in a world that is,

... like a lighted empty hall  
Where stands no host at door or hearth(10-11)

This image is eerily empty, reminiscent of the haunted world Hopkins inherits in Thomas' poem 'Resurrections'. It also inverts the image of Herbert's poem 'Love' (3): no loving host stands at this door. In Herbert's world, the incoherence sprung from sin might spur the speaker to seek forgiveness and restoration to God's glorious presence. Yet here, this world is characterised by gloomy dread and "nothing in [the universe] reveals any sign of

<sup>33</sup> Compare Hopkins' comments in his late Oxford essay on 'The Probable Future of Metaphysics' (*Journals*, pp. 118-121) where he offers a corrective to the predominant philosophy of flux and "development" by suggesting that there are certain forms, known intuitively in music and aesthetics which have "an absolute existence" (p. 120). Hopkins had already converted when this essay was written and it fits well with his conviction of the certainties of Catholicism.

<sup>34</sup> In a letter to A.W.M. Baillie, Hopkins writes that "the *sordidness* of things" is "destroyed by Catholicism" (*Further Letters*, p. 226 (10 September 1865)). See also Norman White, *Hopkins: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 125.

<sup>35</sup> 'God's Grandeur', for example, matches its sense of industrial degradation with the overarching conviction of the Holy Spirit's brooding care over nature. A similar movement is evident in 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection', discussed further below in this chapter. There, Hopkins counters Pater, who prefaced the 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance* with an epigraph from Plato: "Heraclitus says that all things flow and nothing remains fixed".

<sup>36</sup> Unlike some commentators, I have no difficulty with the appellation "terrible". Gary Boucharde comments that the label "has had unfortunate sticking power" ("What Gets Said in a Narrow (ten-by-fourteen) Room: A

its creator".<sup>37</sup> Contention and nationalistic creeds have come to fill the vacuum (32-34). As in the later terrible sonnets, all prayers are lost and all hymns stifled.<sup>38</sup> No "forgiving voice" responds to the sinner's plea (4); no "answering voice" replies to the psalms of the faithful (2). Rather than the Spirit moving over the face of the waters,<sup>39</sup> "unbroken silence broods" over the earth (19). God's speech and story have made way for a deathly silence that taunts him with the possibility that meaning was until recently available, but has now just departed. Despite ending with a resolve to wait patiently for "morn eternal" (54), 'Nondum' actually suggests that those who dare to try and make sense of life's dizzying incoherence receive the terror of nothingness for their pains:

... blackest night  
Giddies the soul with blinding daze  
That dares to cast its searching sight  
On being's dread and vacant maze. (27-30)

To be aware of incoherence, one must first have some standard of coherence against which to judge the incoherence and Miller points out that Hopkins later defends the existence of God along these lines.<sup>40</sup> Yet here, the speaker's intuition of coherence has been destroyed, replaced only by the giddy awareness of "blackest night" (27). He is two hundred years too late to hear news of God.

This sense of desperation typifies the early phase of Hopkins' poetry before his conversion to Roman Catholicism.<sup>41</sup> Remembering the picture of despair which 'Nondum' paints, that conversion is made in reaction against the disintegrative "modern forms of rationalism such as biblical criticism and Darwinism", in favour of the alternative premises of Catholicism's "rational coherence"<sup>42</sup> which allowed for a coherent cosmology.<sup>43</sup> The sense

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Reconsideration of Hopkins's Later Sonnets' in *Re-Reading Hopkins: Selected New Essays* ed. by Francis I. Fennell (University of Victoria: English Literary Studies, 1996), pp. 180-192 (p. 180).

<sup>37</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 273.

<sup>38</sup> Compare especially 'To Seem the Stranger', (11-13), 'I Wake and Feel', (7-9) and the abysses of 'Nondum' (25-31) with 'No Worst'. Other ideas found in 'Nondum' before reappearing in the terrible sonnets include the need for patience, (compare 'Nondum' (45) with 'Patience, hard thing!'), and the general need to cling to the hope that God hears, despite appearances otherwise ('Nondum', 43-54, 'My Own Heart', 9-14).

<sup>39</sup> As in Genesis 1.2, and even in Hopkins' sonnet, 'God's Grandeur' (14), where the verb "broods", used of silence in 'Nondum', is reappplied to the Spirit.

<sup>40</sup> Miller, pp. 272-273 drawing on Hopkins' aborted commentary on the 'Principle and Foundation' of the *Spiritual Exercises*, (*Sermons*, pp. 122-130), where Hopkins argues that the individual's sense of unique pattern must have been formed by "a more exquisite, determining, selfmaking, power" (p. 125).

<sup>41</sup> Compare 'My Prayers Must Meet a Brazen Heaven', or 'Trees by their Yield', where his "sap is sealed", and his "root is dry" (3-4). For the decision to the "slaughter of the innocents" in his *Journal*, 11 May 1868, universally interpreted as a decision to destroy his poetry (R.B. Martin, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 174; White, p. 160).

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Brown, *Hopkins' Idealism: Philosophy, Physics, Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 18. Compare Miller, p. 272: "To [Hopkins,] Darwinian evolutionism is an absurdity".

<sup>43</sup> Brown, pp. 18, 20.

of desperate fragmentation and chaos which overshadowed the earlier poetry is replaced in the 1870s by an immanentist sacramental vision in which Hopkins discerns Christ's presence enlivening the world. This new discernment of an incarnational coherence is related to the transubstantial belief which was so important to his conversion and which led him to trace an incarnational coherence in the world.<sup>44</sup> McNees argues that this change is evident in the fabric of Hopkins' poems. Although some poems written before his conversion to Catholicism are concerned with the eucharist ('The Half-way House', 'Barnfloor and Winepress', 'Easter Communion'), McNees argues that these only "refer to ... the eucharistic sacrament". They rely heavily on "traditional theological metaphors" in order to stress "the centrality of Real Presence in the Eucharist" and chart "routes toward achieving it".<sup>45</sup> But with 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', McNees argues, Hopkins "becomes a sacramental poet" straining to show that ordinary language is "ultimately incarnational and therefore shot through with divine presence".<sup>46</sup> In this mature work, there is a "collusion of syntax and semantics" to form "something extraordinary, revelatory".<sup>47</sup> McNees may overstate her case here,<sup>48</sup> but certainly this poetry shows a new confidence in word and world which flows from the conviction that Christ's incarnation sanctifies and ennobles earthly existence. The incarnation underlies and guarantees sacramental efficacy, providing coherence to both priestly vocation and to sacramental poetry. In the 1870s, Hopkins' thought and poetry move towards a conviction of the "gradual integration" of everything in Christ.<sup>49</sup>

This intense encounter with Christ in nature is manifested also in Hopkins' development of the vocabulary of inscape and instress. Whatever the precise meanings of those terms,

<sup>44</sup> Both as a Catholic and as a Tractarian, Hopkins held that "the least fragment of the consecrated elements in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar is the whole Body of Christ born of the Blessed Virgin", and having seen "the Tractarian ground . . . broken to pieces", he believed he could hold this doctrine only as a Catholic (*Further Letters*, p. 92 (to his father, 16 October 1866)). Later, as a Jesuit, he was particularly attached to the feast of Corpus Christi. Miller, pp. 311-312, traces the incarnational coherence to these doctrines. Compare Willis' passionate statement of transubstantial theology in Newman's novel, *Loss and Gain*: "to me nothing is so consoling, so piercing, so thrilling, so overcoming, as the Mass . . . it is a great action, the greatest action that can be on earth. It is, not the invocation merely, but, if I dare use the word, the evocation of the Eternal. He becomes present on the altar in flesh and blood, before whom angels bow and devils tremble . . .". (John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain*, ed. by Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 226.)

<sup>45</sup> Eleanor J. McNees, *Eucharistic Poetry: The Search for Presence in the Writings of John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas and Geoffrey Hill* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992), pp. 78, 83.

<sup>46</sup> McNees, pp. 86, 93.

<sup>47</sup> McNees, p. 93.

<sup>48</sup> Compare David A. Downes, *The Great Sacrifice: Studies in Hopkins* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983), pp. 99-100, arguing that Hopkins recognises language's *inability* to incarnate divine presence.

<sup>49</sup> Miller, p. 313. Miller goes on to say that Christ is therefore "the ultimate guarantee for the validity of metaphor", a view with which McNees takes issue on the grounds that creation actually and literally *is* grounded in Christ such that there is nothing metaphorical about it.

both are associated with his conviction of the Christ-created rightness and uniqueness of everything which exists. In one notable journal entry he observes that “[w]hat you look hard at seems to look hard at you”,<sup>50</sup> which in Martin’s interpretation, means that everything radiates back to the observer its own individual meaning, that is “the inner coherence of the individual distinguishing it from any other example”.<sup>51</sup> Individual inscape, in other words, proves the reality of cosmic coherence. In Duns Scotus, Hopkins found a theological framework on which to hang his conviction that this coherence is divinely ordained.<sup>52</sup> Under this divine pattern, the beauties of the world could be held to manifest God’s supervisory transcendence and Christ’s attributes. As Hywel Thomas points out, following Scotus meant that Hopkins did not have to choose between “the beauty of the world and that of its creator” because “the two are essentially one and the same”.<sup>53</sup> Loving the beauties of the world was not idolatry,<sup>54</sup> but a potential act of worship. “All then remaining”, says Thomas, “is the religious duty of acknowledging it, of joyfully rendering oneself a channel for, and further development of that [Christ-derived] beauty”.<sup>55</sup>

Christ, therefore, gives individuals a place within a coherently organised universe and this, as is clear from ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’, is the justification for individual vocation. For, in fulfilling its Christ-created function, every creature lives up to the purpose of its calling, implicitly crying “*What I do is me: for that I came*” (8). This gives individuals universal significance under Christ which McNees discusses in terms of the *kenosis* and *pleroma* (“self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment”) experienced by communicants during the eucharist.<sup>56</sup> Christ “sakes” himself in those who sacrificially offer themselves to him,<sup>57</sup> so that they are then joined into the fullness of the Christly pattern of the entire universe, a pattern which includes their individual vocations. As individuals act out their vocations for Christ, Christ is acting through them. Thus, when the “just man” of ‘Kingfishers’ “Keeps grace”, it is God’s grace that “keeps all his goings graces”. Phillips points out the link between this grace and the “grace of vocation” to which Hopkins refers in a sermon on Matthew 9.9. It

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<sup>50</sup> *Journals*, p. 204 (March 1871).

<sup>51</sup> Martin, p. 205.

<sup>52</sup> John Pick, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Priest and Poet*, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 36, 53.

<sup>53</sup> Hywel Thomas, p. 354.

<sup>54</sup> A danger Martin identifies (p. 206).

<sup>55</sup> Hywel Thomas, p. 354.

<sup>56</sup> McNees, p. 76.

<sup>57</sup> McNees, p. 88: “self-sacrifice [is] a prerequisite for identification with Christ”. “Sakes” is a term used by Hopkins — see *To Bridges*, p. 83.



is "God's will making itself felt . . . from one particular quarter and to one particular end".<sup>58</sup> Similarly, in another sermon, Hopkins insists that Christ's call guarantees all human roles:

The wife wants her master a good husband, Christ wants it more; the child wishes him a good father, Christ [wants it more]; the employer wants him a faithful workman, he is satisfied with moderately good work, Christ is not, he looks at it with a keener artist's eye . . .<sup>59</sup>

The quarter to which the priest is called is, of course, a religious vocation. This draws him on to re-enact in the Mass what Christ did in his incarnate life. The priest's vocation requires him to allow Christ's grace to flow through him. McNees demonstrates this by citing the Roman Catholic Missal in which the prayer of consecration is "the voice of God speaking through the priest who has become a vehicle for the process".<sup>60</sup> It is by being open to Christ's grace that the priest's vocation, like all other vocations, is possible. Under Christ, everything has a place in a grand, universal pattern. Where this place is discovered, true saking and selving result, and it is possible to discover one's true, Christ-given vocation.

Once Christly coherence is held to guarantee individual inscape, it can then be traced out into the broadest reaches of the universe. Hence the stars of 'The Starlight Night', as much as the dragonflies and men of 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', are caught up in the web of Christly significance. The stars become, or rather *are* Christ ('The Starlight Night' (13-14)). For Hopkins in the 1870s, "the literal [is] the only ground of being"<sup>61</sup> and the literal is Christ:

Christ is the perfection of human nature, but he is also the perfection of birds, trees, stones, flowers, clouds, and waterfalls. He is, to give the Scotist term for this concept, the *natura communis*, the common nature who contains in himself all natures. . . . Each created thing is a version of Christ, and derives its being from the way it expresses Christ's nature in a unique way. All things rhyme in Christ.<sup>62</sup>

Hopkins' poems of the 1870s continually celebrate this coherence. The exultant tone of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' springs from the conviction that Christ is "under the world's splendour and wonder" (38) so that the world constantly rhymes to his divinely creative presence. As one epithet from 'The Deutschland' expresses it, Christ is he whom

. . . the present and past,  
Heaven and earth are word of, worded by . . . (229-230)

<sup>58</sup> *Sermons*, p. 23. Compare Phillips' note, p. 349.

<sup>59</sup> *Sermons*, p. 49. Compare also *Sermons*, p. 240: "When a man is in God's grace . . . then everything that he does . . . gives God glory".

<sup>60</sup> McNees, p. 87.

<sup>61</sup> McNees, p. 85.

<sup>62</sup> Miller, p. 313.

Heaven and earth do not simply express him, they are also expressed through, organised by and bounded in him. Within the nautical context of 'The Deutschland', Christ is the "World's strand, sway of the sea" (3), who contains the world within his shore and regulates its tidal rhythms, its ebb and flow. As well as the "master of the tides" (249), God is the "girth", "wharf", "wall" and "Ground of being, and granite of it" (254). There is a sense here of the massive, unshakeable boundaries of divine control, a universal control which extends to the speaker and to all humanity, enabling them to outlook storms and even death itself. Behind all the tempests of life and mind, the reader is enjoined to "Grasp God" who is "throned behind/Death with a sovereignty that heeds but hides, bodes but abides" (255-256). The coherence guaranteed by God's sovereignty is not immediately obvious because it "hides", but for those with eyes to see, it "abides" to protect their vocational destiny. Viewed thus, the disaster of 'The Deutschland' is less a disaster than a practical demonstration of God's ultimate mastery.

Yet this assertion of God's unabated sovereignty hides some misgivings. The tall nun's destiny is secure because her "heart [was] right" (225). She has Christ "for the pain, for the/Patience" (241-242). But there is no such guarantee for the "Comfortless unconfessed" souls aboard the ship (244). Although the poem strains to make "the shipwreck" into "a harvest", in which these "poor sheep" are startled back to their master (248), this hope is expressed in rather uncertain rhetorical questions ("is the shipwreck then a harvest" (248)), mirrored in rather monotonous and unconvincing rhyme words. Stanza 31 attempts to rhyme "the" and "the" with "thee" (241, 243, 248), "them" and "them" with "the" (242, 244, 246), and "Providence" with "and" (245, 247). The unease evident here departs from the poem's generally certain rhyme. When it comes to dealing with the fate of the "unconfessed", the speaker apparently has subconscious doubts that God's control can be trusted absolutely.

In part, this is due to Hopkins' exclusive focus on the goodness of God's created order. As seen above, Herbert's speaker customarily discovers that insecurity and incoherence are products of sin and so learns to take some personal responsibility for the disorder. In the poems of the 1870s, however, Hopkins focuses so intensely on God's control, that his scheme sublimates any explanation for the disorder, including the standard explanation of pointing to sin. He does not deny sin (what else can the comfortless unconfessed confess?), but he downplays its impact on his vision of the Christ-centred coherence of the

universe. This is understandable: when these disturbing realities force themselves into his poetry ('The Sea and the Skylark', 'Spring', 'Binscy Poplars' etc.), the vacant emptiness of his pre-Catholic poetry returns and anticipates the devastation of 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' or the terrible sonnets.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps, hidden unease is an inevitable adjunct to the exultant theology of inscape which has little adequate explanation for any contradiction to Christly order. For most of the 1870s, such unease is merely an undercurrent in poetry which affirms that Christ's instressing action in the universe makes life meaningful. But the unease it sublimates cannot be forever ignored.

Thus in the 1880s, the unease returns, most notably in the terrible sonnets, but also elsewhere. Hopkins intended 'The Leaden Echo' to feature as a chorus in his drama about St. Winifred, where its negativity would be countered by the quiet affirmation of 'The Golden Echo'. Outside its dramatic setting, however, its nihilistic throbbing almost drowns out its partner's hope. Ordinarily, Hopkins' refashioning of syntax expands and enriches meaning, but in 'The Leaden Echo', sentences disintegrate under the threat of annihilation. The hope-against-hope that there might be some way to keep beauty "from vanishing away" (2), to wave off the "most mournful messengers of grey" (4),<sup>64</sup> unravels until the poems' refrains are reduced to a hopeless litany of despair. By the poem's close, however, syntax collapses altogether and descends to the numbing repetition of a single word:

So be beginning, be beginning to despair.  
O there's none; no no no there's none:  
Be beginning to despair, to despair,  
Despair, despair, despair, despair. (13-16)

In those final dripping cadences, even the meaning of the word "despair" is threatened, as its repetition tails off into a slumbering void where sound and spelling seem arbitrary and ridiculous. There is nothing (no, no, no) to hope for or to expect. The beginning is the end, because the only beginning is despair.

In context, 'The Golden Echo' counters this despair, but there is no such counterpointing hope in the terrible sonnets of desolation. They return to the bleak and vacant imagery that characterised such poems as 'Nondum', and although they clutch after a vision of

<sup>63</sup> Although those sonnets are not much concerned (at least at a conscious level) with sin. 'I wake and feel' does mention that "Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours"; and 'Carrion Comfort' flirts with the idea of suicide, but the sonnets as a whole suggest a tone more of self-righteousness than self-abasement. 'Thou Art Indeed Just Lord' explicitly contrasts the speaker's sterile condition with that of the fertile "sinners".

<sup>64</sup> Compare Herbert's 'The Forerunners', where death's harbingers mark the speaker's head with white.

coherence and order, they evidence little but personal disintegration. In that environment, faith and vocation have no place to stand. 'Carrión Comfort' presents an exceedingly poignant instance of the fierce battle against personal disintegration and solipsism. Its speaker is at his last resort, facing the temptation of self-annihilation, to feed like a cannibal on the carrion carcass of self-disgust.<sup>65</sup> His desperate resolution not to "untwist" the "last strands of man" in him (2) is made on the verge of total fraying into nothingness. The resolve to continue living only drags him one step back from the abyss. He is, as Harris writes, "pinioned between damnation and disaster", not as in 'The Deutschland', between "damnation and grace".<sup>66</sup> As in 'Nondum', neither rescuing grace nor answering voice seems available.<sup>67</sup>

The threat of personal disintegration is matched by the collapse of the speaker's relationships. There are no human relationships in 'Carrión Comfort', only the extremes of self-absorption on one hand and his dealings with God on the other. And his dealings with God are completely other than Herbert's dramatisation of the relationship between God and the self. As in Herbert, there is a cast of only two, yet Herbert's tortures are always balanced by hope that is either promised or realised. Hopkins' relationship with God remains intact, but it is hopeless and comfortless. Dark nights become years of torment (13), and God is not the source of comfort, but a titanic wrestling opponent. Perhaps there is comfort in the echoes of Jacob's story in Genesis 32, but otherwise, the only comfort comes through the false agency of Despair.

Harris argues that the terrible sonnets represent a failure of the Scotist scheme on which Hopkins' vision of transcendent coherence depends. He looks for evidence of this to Hopkins' use of imagery. Under Scotus' influence, Hopkins had sidelined metaphor and simile in favour of literal meaning in which all things express Christ's immanence in the world.<sup>68</sup> But in the terrible sonnets, this vision of total coherence and immanent sacramentalism fails, and Hopkins returns to the analogical language of metaphor and simile.<sup>69</sup> No longer do Hopkins' poems act as channels that instress the ever constant

<sup>65</sup> Miller, p. 347.

<sup>66</sup> Daniel A. Harris, *Inspirations Unbidden: The 'Terrible Sonnets' of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 100.

<sup>67</sup> For the possibility that grace is at work in this situation, see Chapter Four below.

<sup>68</sup> As well as Harris, compare McNees, p. 85. McNees is not writing about the terrible sonnets at this point.

<sup>69</sup> Harris, pp. 24, 29, 117 etc: "In the 'terrible sonnets,' therefore, the perceptible fact that the few remaining images from nature are either metaphors or similes constitutes direct evidence that the 'penetrative imagination,' . . . has failed" (47). Compare also McNees, p. 84, "When intellect appears to reign over

presence of Christ, but they are instead caught in a vicious solipsistic circle that has no reference beyond the speaker's self. Harris maintains that this solipsistic inversion destroys Hopkins' vocation, because it destroys any sense of external coherence and seals off the possibility of God's grace. The "isolated self-enclosure" of the sonnets, "is too absolute to permit those priestly and ritual gestures towards an implied audience through which [Hopkins] had previously fulfilled his ministry".<sup>70</sup> Other than his divided self and the silent, violent presence of God, there is neither audience, parish nor congregation for these poems:

It was only with such a hypothesized audience, quasi-idealized and strangely extrapolated from the factual audience of Bridges alone, that Hopkins could truly fulfill his priestly role...<sup>71</sup>

In the terrible sonnets, however, the coherence and integration which enabled priestly ritual and vocation are undone. Without an assumed congregation to exhort and for whom to channel Christ's inscape, Hopkins can no longer justify his poetry under the umbrella of his priestly vocation, because it is no longer "working for the salvation of the entire Christian community and thus abetting the prosecution of God's design." Doubtful of God, the speaker of the terrible sonnets lacks an *ecclesia* for whom he can mediate or inscape the presence of Christ so that, he is, Harris maintains, "a man divested of his ecclesiastical office".<sup>72</sup>

This collapse of vocation is evident in the tone of the sonnets. Characteristically, Hopkins' tone is an exhortative attitude of congregational address (or "bidding" as Hopkins describes it<sup>73</sup>), but in the terrible sonnets, it becomes one of brooding introspection. The colloquy with God which should close an Ignatian meditation<sup>74</sup> is replaced by a solipsistic, almost blasphemous, colloquy with the self.<sup>75</sup> Only 'Patience' and 'My Own Heart' conclude with anything approaching external colloquy, yet there the colloquy is vague and deferred, with the speaker at pains to convince himself of his own message. Adrift in a universe that is disintegrating into a solipsistic prison, the terrible sonnets lock the speaker into a confusion of vocation at the very core of his being. His centre cannot hold. Nor

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sacramental evidence as in the Terrible Sonnets, Hopkins does revert to metaphor that is more akin to self-projection than to fusion."

<sup>70</sup> Harris, p. 129.

<sup>71</sup> Harris, p. 134.

<sup>72</sup> Harris, p. 143.

<sup>73</sup> See *To Bridges*, p. 160, where Hopkins writes in praise of "bidding", that is, "the art . . . of saying everything right *to* or *at* the hearer, interesting him, holding him in the attitude of correspondent". See also Harris, pp. 137-138.

<sup>74</sup> Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century*, 1vsl edn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962), pp. 36-37.

<sup>75</sup> Harris, p. 142.

perhaps can the centre of the universe, for in 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', the speaker's vision of disintegration expands to threaten that as well. The desolation of the terrible sonnets appeared to be local, but in 'Sibyl's Leaves', the speaker considers that his viewpoint is part of the God-ordained apocalyptic destruction that envelops all of creation. Time has always been leading towards cosmic disintegration. As evening strains to be both the "womb-of-all" and the "hearse-of-all" night (2), there is no essential difference between birth and death. There is simply a "dismembering" (7) where all physical life is taken apart and a "Disremembering" (7) where consciousness is abandoned as pointless. Individuality is consumed in the judgement which reduces life's "skeined stained veined variety" (11) to the sparse categories of black and white, right and wrong (12). Unnamed, God lurks in the background, not as he who fathers forth the rich created variety of all things ('Pied Beauty'), but as the expeditor of judgement.

Against this mood of disintegrative despair, familiar from 'Nondum', only a desperate fling of the heart to the heart of the host, or a prodigal's return to Christ can reintegrate the universe. This is the final resort of 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection' which again evokes the brink of collapse. Although its opening appears to celebrate nature's capacity for self-renewal, the infinite expenditure of energy soon leads towards the consuming nothingness familiar from 'Sibyl's Leaves'. Suffering and decay are inherent in the processes of Nature which march indifferently towards destruction:

... Million-fueled, nature's bonfire burns on. (9)

The poem's particular lament is for human death. Of all creation, humanity alone can discern aesthetic value in nature, yet humans too are at the mercy of decay. The speaker's assessment of humanity as nature's "bonniest" and "dearest" will also be swept away by the tide of darkness:

But quench her bonniest, dearest to her, her clearest-selved spark  
 Man, how fast his fire-dint, his mark on mind is gone!  
 Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark  
 Drowned. O pity and indignation! (10-13)

Thus, although the inevitability of death undoes all grounds for hope, this indignation at death also provokes a rebellious defiance against the enormous dark. For the speaker remains convinced that "Manshape" is "a star", unique and glorious (13-14), which he will not accept exists for nothing. It is, finally, his supra-rational conviction that darkness will not decide the issue which causes him to grasp again after the only hope he has ever known, that of Christ-centred coherence. Just as Christ rises from the enormous darkness

of 'The Deutschland', so he reappears here. Although burdened by the blurring vastness and the levelling march of time, the speaker jumps in hope at the beacon of Christ's resurrection. The resurrection is a "heart's clarion", a call that banishes "grief's gasping, joyless days, dejection" (17) and leaves behind the natural ravages of mortality, the fading of flesh and ephemeral trash. It alone provides the hope of an escape route from the tyrannical fact of human mortality; the only justification for the conviction that human life is worthwhile. Thus the ecstatic denouement of the poem occurs in staunch defiance of the evidence of the mortal senses:

I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and  
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,  
Is immortal diamond. (22-24)

Harris doubts the success of this resolution because it requires "so many intermediary steps" and lapses again into analogical thinking:

What is achieved here, with great bravura, is less a statement of identity than an affirmation of possibility. The passage shows a transcendent Christ who *was* but *is not* immanent in the lower portions of the metamorphic spectrum . . . <sup>76</sup>

Indeed. But Harris downplays the fact that the poem is built on eschatological hope, the expectation of the final "trumpet crash" (21). In the speaker's experience, Christ was, is not and *yet will be* the guarantor of his creature. This, of course, is absurd. The speaker has no ground but that of faith to assert that in his already occurred, depressed experience, Christ *will* rescue his existence from decay. Yet that is what he affirms. Faced with a choice between mortal death and the hope of Christ-guaranteed life, he opts from his position of emptiness for faith in Christ.<sup>77</sup> Hence the insistent, repeated vowels of the incantatory conclusion are redemptively releasing as they rise to consummation in the final line's crisp understatement. As Christ in his full humanity is an immortal DIAMOND ("I am" clothed in mortal substance), so in him the speaker is neither simply a Jack nor a joke, but (almost matter of factly) the immortal diamond arising from the carbonised matchwood.<sup>78</sup> Despite all indications to the contrary, despite the fact of death, the individualised speaker reasserts his place in the natural order and the dignity of humanity. Christ, the poem declares to its readers and to its speaker, is the guarantor of all existence. There is consequently work for them to do. Under Christ, their vocation counts.

<sup>76</sup> Harris, p. 46.

<sup>77</sup> Hopkins effects a similar move earlier in 'The Golden Echo'. In the face of present human experience ("haggard at the heart, so care-coiled, care-killed, so fagged, so fashed, so clogged, so cumbered" (26)), he asserts God's providential safekeeping of human beauty and experience.

<sup>78</sup> James Finn Cotter, 'Apocalyptic Imagery in Hopkins' "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection", *Victorian Poetry*, 24 (1986), 261-273 (p. 272); Michael L. Johnson, 'Hopkins, Heraclitus, Cosmic Instress and of the Comfort of the Resurrection', *Victorian Poetry*, 10 (1972) 235-242 (pp. 239-240).

Hopkins' position is thus extremely variable and complex. He is caught in a dilemma that Herbert could hardly know, but also one more sharply focused than that experienced by Thomas. He lives at a turning point between Herbert's old order, in which God's organisation of vocation is taken for granted, and Thomas' new, where God's providential care is in doubt. The fool, the priest and the king are no more, but no new beast has slouched obviously toward Bethlehem to take their place. So he leaps from the frightening instability of the abyss to the certainty of faith. Yet faith's certainty is itself scarred by the loss of the old communal order, so that the affirmation of Christ in the 'Heraclitean Fire', inheriting the legacy of the terrible sonnets, must be launched from the first person: "I am all at once what Christ is . . .". Where the poems of the 1870s begin and end in Christ, Hopkins' poetic career ends where 'Nondum' began it: agonising from personal experience. In the 1880s, however, that agonising forms part of a process of kenosis which leads back to Christ. By trusting Christ to validate that personal experience, he trusts that Christ will preserve his vocation.

On the surface, therefore, Hopkins ends, like Herbert, with his vocation securely established in Christ. In fact, however, the nature of Hopkins' agony is significantly different from Herbert's. For Hopkins' final first person focus modifies his attempt to stave off the individualising direction of post-medieval, Western rationalism by establishing an ideal Catholic community. The secure faith community in which Herbert ministered has disintegrated, so that Hopkins' attempt to promulgate a vision of Scotist coherence appears as a wishful attempt to return to the middle ages. The fragmentation of community and the evaporation of symbols make this nigh impossible. As Thomas could tell Hopkins, any return to faith must go inwards to confront his own suffering experience. It is there, in the difficult territory of despair and darkness, that Hopkins leaps after the possibility of vocation. He no longer has Herbert's guaranteed vocational place within the community, but as the following chapters suggest, his suffering turn to Christ allows him to find a place under Christ on his difficult vocational journey.

### *Thomas — Faith under Fathoms of Darkness*

Matters for R.S. Thomas are very different. He has given up on discovering the coherence which Herbert assumes and which Hopkins seeks. His world and his vocation are not



threatened by personal sin,<sup>79</sup> as Herbert's is. Rather, he presumes the incoherence which Hopkins foresaw and feared in 'Sibyl's Leaves'. In Thomas' world, rationalistic optimism has utterly failed, so that his speakers, schooled on Kierkegaard, face dark shadows and bottomless abysses. They probe uncertainly for signs of God's activity in the world, haunted always by the possibility that their searches can only uncover their own reflections. Yet despite their constant uncertainty, Thomas' poems indicate that knowledge of God may only be possible by staring through the disintegration. True faith discovers God without certainty, so that vocational activity must be in some sense a response to incoherence. Thus both priest and poet testify to glimpses of unity discerned through and beyond the incoherence of the world. Both oppose the demystifying practices of science which, attempting to make coherent sense of life, have only sterilised it and denied it of depth. Even if poet and priest struggle to find a fixed and common understanding of "God", the priest-poet witnesses instead to the belief "that if man is to achieve unity, then it is in God and through God that he will do so".<sup>80</sup>

Thomas starts, however, from a position of despair. He has no illusions that Christianity can provide the stable community basis which it did for Herbert or even Hopkins. 'Poste Restante' looks back on a church in which "few worshipped" (6). The church in 'The Moon in Lleyn' is full "only/of the silent congregation/of shadows" (6-8), which prompts its speaker to declare that "Religion is over" (18). Although this pessimism is tempered during the poem by an external, possibly divine voice of hope, the church remains empty. And this is more than simply a sociological observation: empty churches reflect underlying religious difficulties. Thomas has inherited Herbert's pastoral model, but not his collective religious and scientific certainties. Instead, Thomas' poetry looks out on a universe of vast, blank distances, either indifferent or hostile to humanity. The speaker in 'The Listener in the Corner' seems utterly at home on the "darkling plain" of Arnold's 'Dover Beach':

... Outside the wind  
howls; the stars, that once  
were the illuminated city  
of the imagination, to him are fires  
extinguished before the eyes' lenses  
formed. The universe  
is a large place with more of  
darkness than light . . . (11-18)

<sup>79</sup> Sin is rarely named as such in Thomas' poetry and when it is, it has little to do with individual responsibility: The early 'A Thought from Nietzsche' (published 1955), suggests something akin to original sin: "You are betrayed by wilderness within,/That spreads upward and outward like a stain", but the more recent 'First Person' (published 1993) proceeds in almost Eastern mystical terms: "Sin happens, pain happens" as "the penalties/of division, a surrender to the belief/that we are not whole".

<sup>80</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Unity', in *R.S. Thomas: Selected Prose*, pp. 143-158, (p. 152).

Despite the poised tone here, the construction of the piece reminds the reader that the unease stems from very real causes. The rhythmical stresses fall on such unsettling words as "howls", "extinguished" and "darkness". Likewise, the enjambment defies any complacency so that the stars' "fires" which appear to burn as brightly as the "illuminated city" have in reality already been "extinguished", perhaps dismissing as too optimistic Hopkins' "circle-citadels" in "The Starlight Night" (13). The "large place" is not full of promise but contains "more of/darkness than light". The human species has no privileged place in the hierarchy of an unaccommodating universe and the imagination of previous ages is cowed by the howling immensity of the cosmos outside.<sup>81</sup> Such a vast universe renders human religion decidedly provincial, revelation improbable and knowledge of God virtually impossible. The God of such a cosmos must be the "vertical God" of "The Cast", "whose altitudes are the mathematics/that confound us" (8-10). The speaker asks whether humanity's thought is anything other than the "mind's/scream" (11-12) as it "hurtles/in free-fall" down God's "immense/side" "arriving nowhere but at the precipitousness/of [his] presence" (12-16). The mind reels from such an inquiry, unable to gain any purchase on the concept of God discovered. As in the terrible sonnets, there is no love in this relation with the unscaleable, vertical God, simply "the mind's/scream" of endless mental torment. Dealing with God's immensity in an uncaring cosmos dizzies the mind and unsettles religious sensibilities.

Other poems undermine religious sensibilities at a more local level. By perverting a central Romantic aphorism and distorting a significant biblical passage, 'Senior' suggests the necessity of outgrowing received religious and poetic frameworks. Confronting his place in the cosmos, the speaker ponders whether there is any meaning in the universe at all:

What is a galaxy's meaning?  
The stars relay to the waste  
places of the earth, as they do  
to the towns, but it is  
a cold message. There is randomness  
at the centre, agitation subsisting  
at the heart of what would be  
endless peace.

(15-22)

The elliptical terms in which this rhetorical question is answered suggest that the galaxy is largely meaningless. Whereas the prophet Isaiah enjoins the "waste places of Jerusalem" to "Break forth into joy" (Isaiah 52.9), the impassive stars of the Milky Way here bring "a

<sup>81</sup> Further examples of a universe indifferent to humanity are found in 'The Porch' where the protagonist looks out from the domestic familiarity of his church porch onto "a universe/that was without knowledge of

cold message" to the "waste/places" of earth, and no joyful Magi attend them. But neither does the poetic alternative offer any hope. Lines 19 to 21 invert Wordsworth's cheerful assertion that the universe imparts "Authentic tidings of invisible things", and "central peace subsisting at the heart/Of endless agitation".<sup>82</sup> Instead, Thomas' speaker follows Yeats to the agitated centre that cannot hold, watching as anarchy is loosed upon the world.

'Threshold' operates in a similar manner by merging the speaker's situation with that of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19 as he emerges "from the mind's/cave into the worse darkness/outside" (1-3). Outside, as in the biblical story, "things pass and/the Lord is in none of them" (3-4):

And [the word of the LORD] said, Go forth and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire . . .<sup>83</sup>

In the biblical account, this procession of power is followed by the quiet humility of "a still small voice" in which God is implicitly present. In the poem, however, the "voice" is not that which Elijah heard. "I have heard," the speaker says,

. . . the still, small voice  
and it was that of the bacteria  
demolishing my cosmos. (4-6)

This understated matter-of-factness works to chilling effect. The conjunction "and" does not prepare the reader for the demolition wrought by the bacteria. The link between the destruction and the still, small voice, suggests either that the bacteria have replaced God entirely or that they perform his work. Both options are unpalatable, so that the speaker abandons his impassive tone and he cries out in a despairing exasperation bordering on surrender. "Ah," he says,

what balance is needed at  
the edges of such an abyss.  
I am alone on the surface  
of a turning planet . . . (12-16)

In such circumstances, religious belief and the belief that one has been called to a vocational task are exceedingly difficult to sustain. Questions of this importance must be faced but, after the collapse of collective religious faith, they can only be faced alone. Thomas' isolation is thus qualitatively different from the loneliness whence Herbert

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him" (15-16); or 'Riposte' where one speaker argues that, if the universe is the product of design, it is a design 'Not oriented manward.' (6)

<sup>82</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, Book IV, lines 1144-1147.

engages in colloquy with God. For Thomas, isolation and incoherence can seem at times to be total, denying the possibility of communication with God and threatening to destroy vocation altogether.

D.Z. Phillips argues that Thomas' general willingness to admit incoherence is a rejection of all attempts at theodicy. Considering particularly the savagery of some "mythopoeic"<sup>84</sup> poems, Phillips links Thomas with Hume in asking the terrifying question: "What if there is a radical disorder at the heart of things?" rather than any "divine order behind the veil."<sup>85</sup> Thomas' poetry, according to Phillips, "acknowledges that theology may be in a wild and unsettled state in its attempt to make a system out of the sense of things",<sup>86</sup> simply because no system is possible. Phillips' position on Thomas' attitude to theodicy has some problems,<sup>87</sup> but he is right that Thomas directly faces the possibility of disorder. Nonetheless, despite the chaos, Thomas retains his will to believe, suggesting that faith must be pursued in full recognition of its own contingency, and of the possibilities of dislocation and incoherence. His poetry does not conclude that the universe is characterised by anarchy. Rather, the ability to recognise incoherence implies some standard for coherence so that religious faith must emerge, if at all, from caverns of doubt. This is not quite Herbert's experience of glorious elevation out of the Chain of Being, but Thomas' experience of dizziness, waiting and uncertainty do not terminate in total despair either. On occasion his doubts lead directly to a staggering, hesitant faith. The "strength of his belief", writes Draper, "is more evident in his doubt than in his faith".<sup>88</sup> Indeed, randomness and incomprehensibility are often the necessary preconditions for his faith. This is most obvious in his ire against those who drain the universe of mystery and dizziness, whether by scientific means or through shallow religiosity. For him, the prime

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<sup>83</sup> 1 Kings 19.11-12.

<sup>84</sup> The term used by Gough, p. 9, to describe Thomas' poems (mostly from the 1970s) which re-imagine creation narratives in order to explore philosophical and theological problems. They are also described as "miniature fables" by Julian Gitzel, ('R.S. Thomas and the Vanishing God of Form and Number', in *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R.S. Thomas*, ed. by William V. Davis (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), pp. 170-181, (p. 173)); "Mythic Poems" by Elaine Shepherd (*R.S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence. Images of God Explored* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 89).

<sup>85</sup> D.Z. Phillips, *R.S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God: Meaning and Mediation in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas* (Allison Park Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1986), p. 72.

<sup>86</sup> D.Z. Phillips, p. 73.

<sup>87</sup> D.Z. Phillips is inclined to turn Thomas into a stoic. There is a stoic strand in Thomas' work, but it is only one strand amongst several.

<sup>88</sup> R.P. Draper quoting T.S. Eliot on Tennyson, in *An Introduction to Twentieth Century Poetry in English* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 178. This description could apply to many Thomas poems, including (almost at random) 'Waiting', 'The Empty Church', 'The Combat'.

enemy of poetry (and by extension, religious faith<sup>89</sup>), is science.<sup>90</sup> Repeatedly, his poetry rails against superficial attempts to accommodate God within human confines and against the scientism that denies mystery and breeds greed for the products of technological advance. Ultimately, Thomas regards the universe less as blindly incoherent than as rightly incomprehensible. So long as human comprehension is partial, faith and poetry can be preserved. Only where there is incomprehension is there mystery and room for God. But when "The scientist/brings his lenses to bear", "unity/is fragmented",<sup>91</sup> and faith dies.

Against this fragmentation, Thomas' poetry and priesthood work tirelessly by satirising false, sterile *ideas* of God.<sup>92</sup> He does this in the mythopoeic poems, but there are also many poems which ridicule human attempts to understand God in scientific categories as if God were an insect for dissection and examination. 'Somewhere' is one such poem which mocks human attempts to domesticate God. It begins by suggesting that quest for proof of God's existence is like a souvenir hunt, an upgraded version of naive medieval spirituality, sustained by the collection of second-hand relics:

Something to bring back to show  
you have been there: a lock of God's  
hair, stolen from him while he was  
asleep; a photograph of the garden  
of the spirit. (1-5)

In the twentieth century, the poem suggests, faith can not thrive in this environment. Thus it shifts quickly to territory that has 'Thomas' greater approval. God defies human categories, and is rather sought than found and catalogued. Thus,

the point of travelling is not  
to arrive, but to return home  
laden with pollen you shall work up  
into the honey the mind feeds on. (6-9)

Spiritual tourism is impossible, because the destinations of the spirit are never reached. Faith involves a continual pilgrimage, where God is known in the journeying. Only those who make this difficult journey can find the material from which to develop the honey of faith, a honey which is not sold in the souvenir shops.

<sup>89</sup> See below n. 94. Compare also 'Thomas' comment to the effect that "poetry is religion, religion is poetry" — John Ormond, 'R.S. Thomas: Priest and Poet. A Transcript of John Ormond's Film for B.B.C. Television, 2 April 1972', *Poetry Wales*, (1972), 47-57 (p. 53).

<sup>90</sup> Coleridge's maxim, of which Thomas is fond: "Poetry is not the proper antithesis to prose, but to science. Poetry is opposed to science" — *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), vol 5: *Lectures 1808-1819 on Literature*, ed. by R.A. Foakes, p. 217. See the reference below at n. 96 for Thomas' use of this maxim.

<sup>91</sup> 'First Person'.

'The Film of God', like 'Somewhere', opens with a similarly foolish attempt to capture God on tape and film. This, writes Phillips, is the fundamental category mistake of trying to "mix two ways of talking of God; [trying] to turn the *Dens absconditus* into an additional presence alongside other beings".<sup>93</sup> But God is beyond this kind of examination, and recognising this, the method of pursuing the quest changes to become like that recommended in 'Somewhere'. God cannot be catalogued and dissected, but the speaker nevertheless craves some indication of God's presence and his patient craving is in some way rewarded. For, the speaker says,

a shadow,  
as we watched, fell, as though  
of an unseen writer bending over  
his work. (16-19)<sup>94</sup>

This shadow is presumably the shadow of God but the interpretation remains dubious. This note of uncertainty gives the poem its customary, difficult Thomist tone. For the shadow can neither be analysed nor caught on film, so that, as in 'Somewhere', the poem resorts to the hope that God is known primarily in waiting and searching. The film continues to run while the watching audience waits for the shadow to reveal itself:

And we waited  
for it to move, silently  
as the spool turned, waited  
for the figure that cast it  
to come into view for us to  
identify it, and it  
didn't and we are still waiting. (20-29)

Evidence of God is private and personal, insusceptible to systemic or scientific analysis. This makes religious faith difficult, but the meaning is in the waiting.<sup>95</sup>

This is an affirmation which the creed of scientism cannot understand. Thomas continually suggests that scientism's analytical impatience has bulldozed over the possibility of faith, leaving vast barrenness rather than incoherence in its wake. Science demands answers and uncovers mysteries and this soon becomes the totalising, vision of materialist scientism. Thomas' poems warn those who live by this vision that they will die by it, inevitably reaping the frustration of a vacuous universe. Sometimes this issues in poems of sarcastic irony. Yet other poems like 'Approaches' and 'Strands' resolutely explore the

<sup>92</sup> "What I'm tilting at is not God, but the ideas of God . . . I'm really being derisive about men's ideas of God" — J.B. Lethbridge, 'R.S. Thomas Talks to J.B. Lethbridge' *Anglo Welsh Review*, 74 (1983), 36-56 (p. 40). This comment is in particular reference to the mythopoeic poems.

<sup>93</sup> D.Z. Phillips, p. 118.

<sup>94</sup> Compare "the movement of a curtain" in 'Folk Tale', where the Rapunzel story becomes a quest for God.

<sup>95</sup> A phrase used in 'Kneeling' (15).

possibility of believing that the universe is vacuous, preferring instead to wait in faith for God, expectantly and perpetually, in spite of the vacuity. 'Approaches' attempts to come to terms with a universe which the ruthless, demystifying power of science has drained of the supernatural. As the speaker moves nearer to where he believes God's shadow is, he discovers that the shadow is in fact growing smaller. Without having moved, God is further off than before,<sup>96</sup> thus suggesting that the technological approach to mystery is misunderstood. In a universe that has become a vast scientific laboratory, it is no longer possible, as the speaker believed it once was, to discern the place where "Godhead was spilled" (11):

Now it is all clinical light  
pouring into the interstices  
  
where mystery could linger  
questioning credentials of the divine  
fossil, sterilising our thought  
for its launching into its own outer space. (15-20)

This sterilisation is disastrous. For within the frame of Thomas' self-quotation, interstices are the safeguards of his religious faith. God in 'Via Negativa' "keeps the interstices/In our knowledge" (6-7), thus providing a retreat from attempts to imagine him in humanity's own image. In the paradigm of scientism, however, mystery is evicted, the interstices are closed, and God is treated as a fossil for academic discussion. Yet in the process, God has slipped through the net. For, to relegate God and mystery in this way is to kill's life's richness. In the poem, humanity's sterilised thought is launched into the ambiguities of "its *own* outer space", an ambiguous phrase with a good hint of self-defeating solipsism. The high-priests of science, the poet declares, will be trapped by their own hermetic thought processes. Where faith opens onto the richness of mystery, science douses mystery with sceptical disinfectant.<sup>97</sup>

The key proponents of this scientific sterilisation process are the scientists. They have usurped both religious and poetic vocation, and having "exchanged/their vestments for white coats", are now "working away" in "bookless laboratories" as ministrants in a "ritual

<sup>96</sup> Compare Herbert's 'Pilgrimage'.

<sup>97</sup> Compare 'Strands', which is a little kinder to the scientific world-view. Still human reason shocks "the manipulator of it with its ability/to discover nothing" (22-23). This is "the ultimate/hole the intrepid reason/has dug for itself" (23-25). Our scientific wings cannot take us to the "far side" of the abyss in human knowledge, so that the poem's closes tentatively suggests a return to the via negativa or Kierkegaard-like faith, for "man's/meaning" lies "in the keeping of himself/a float over seventy thousand/fathoms", tacking against directionless winds (28-33).

beyond words/which is the Last Sacrament of the species" ('Ritual' (17-22)).<sup>98</sup> The absence of books in these rituals confirms that science has abandoned the religious wisdom of the past and the literary arts that go with it.<sup>99</sup> Thus, in the hands of the scientists, but unknown to them, their continual experiments become the sacrament of extreme unction over a dying species. Trapped within their materialistic outlook, the scientific sacraments offer neither hope nor vocational purpose to humanity. One poem from *The Echoes Return Slow* further condemns the scientists and suggests that only a religious outlook can provide any sort of vocational meaning. It does this by alluding to John 1 and the calling of the disciple Nathanael:

I have waited for him  
                    under the tree of science,  
and he has not come;  
                    and no voice has said:  
Behold a scientist in whom  
                    there is no guile. (1-6)<sup>100</sup>

Beside the enduring tradition of faith, scientism appears hopeless because it has done its best to destroy personal significance and any possibility of a supernatural call. Science cannot provide the gospel's sense of hope or purpose. This realisation emboldens the speaker and in the face of science's all-encompassing pretensions, he turns defiant:

... I have looked in  
through the windows of their glass  
                    laboratories and seen them plotting  
the future, and have put a cross  
                    there at the bottom  
of the working out of their problems to  
                    prove to them that they were wrong. (15-21)

The cross, symbol of the mysteries of faith and God's intervention, triumphs over the bland emptiness of a scientific universe and pronounces in final judgement that the plotting of the high priests of science will lead nowhere. In *The Echoes Return Slow*, this poem faces a prose passage which continues the poem's vigorous defence of vocation against the marauding intrusions of the scientists. In it, there is no essential difference between a defence of priesthood and a defence of poetry:

Because Coleridge had said that the opposite of poetry was not prose but science, that was what he preached from the pulpit at times, his eye straying through the leaded window to the sea outside that passed and remained always. He defended himself with the fact that Jesus was a poet, and would have teased the scientists as he teased Nathanael.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Compare 'Bequest' ("Our scientists/had white coats, vestments/these of a clandestine ritual"), and 'Eschatology' ("Our scientists,/immaculately dressed not/conceived, preached to us/from their space stations, calling us/to consider the clockwork birds/and fabricated lilies. . .")

<sup>99</sup> For scientism's opposition to literature's religious function, compare 'Aubade', 'The Other' and 'Postscript', discussed below in Chapters Three and Four.

<sup>100</sup> *Echoes*, p. 89. All poems in this volume are untitled.

<sup>101</sup> *Echoes*, p. 88.



Priest and poet are united here in their defiance of the scientists and their justification for the task is religious. Only in terms of faith is defiance possible. For the scientist is always prey to the margins, teased by what he cannot explain, as the presence of the sea suggests. Here, a chink opens for the vocation of the priest and the poet, teasing the rationalist mind with promises of creation, inscrutability and eternity.

The eucharistic sacrament is the clearest signal of the priest-poet's opposition to the scientist. It is ridiculous to call, as a bishop does in 'Revision',<sup>102</sup> "for an analysis/of the bread and wine", for that is subjecting faith to the dead, scientific categories that have destroyed meaning, symbol and mystery. Thomas' response, typically, is to correct the scientific desire for indubitable certainty by calling for faith which operates outside the realms of positive evidence, in the paradoxical territory inhabited by poetry:

... I being  
no chemist play my recording  
of his silence over  
and over to myself only.<sup>103</sup>

This is where the silent waiting and journeying over fathoms that always characterise faith in Thomas occur. Thus, although the threats from science provide optimal disturbance, uncertainty and incomprehension, they are in fact the breeding ground for Thomas' faith, a faith that must be difficult because the world itself is difficult. Such difficulties lead Thomas to poetry and to the eucharist,<sup>104</sup> because both are fully immersed in the pain of the fragmented universe. The torn bread and the dripping wine share the fragmentation of human experience and so preserve the mystery and paradox necessary for faith.<sup>105</sup> Like poetry and pain, their effect is not susceptible to chemical analysis. Thus, wherever it appears in Thomas' poetry, the eucharist is a sign of hope. It can not cancel pain, but its poetic simplicity points beyond mental anguish to the non-scientific realm of faith and hope. Another poem from *The Echoes Return Slow* intuits the release which the sacrament offers from the anguish of argument and uncertainty:

<sup>102</sup> 'Revision' from *Experimenting With An Amen* ("Heaven affords/unlimited accommodation/to the simple-minded"), not the poem of the same name on p. 22 ("So the catechism begins").

<sup>103</sup> There is possibly a deliberate self-echo here of the earlier poem, 'In Church': "Often I try/To analyse the quality/Of its silences." Two fundamentally different types of analysis are occurring here, but the inscrutable silence is the same.

<sup>104</sup> "Christ was a poet, . . . the New Testament was poetry, and . . . I had no difficulty in preaching the New Testament in its poetic context" — R.S. Thomas, 'Autobiographical Essay', in *Miraculous Simplicity*, pp. 1-20, (p. 17).

<sup>105</sup> Compare 'Hill Christmas', 'In Great Waters' and 'Perspectives (Christian)', for affirmation of the affinity which eucharistic celebration has with the earth.

The breaking of the wave  
outside echoed the breaking  
of the bread in his hands.

The crying of the sea gulls  
was the cry from the Cross:  
Lama Sabachthani. He lifted

the chalice, that crystal in  
which love questioning is love  
blinded with excess of light.<sup>106</sup>

The images of this brief poem begin analogically but conclude in literalism. Initially, the waves *echo* the priest's breaking of bread, suggesting a connection between the sacrament and earthly reality. This connection is enforced further in the second stanza as analogy is abandoned in favour of a Hopkins-like literalism. Equation replaces echo: the cry of the gulls is identified as inseparable from the cry of the Cross, the cry which spells the greatest desolation of all: "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The gulls take up and repeat the cry St Paul describes in Romans 8.22, the groan of creation under the weight of universal dislocation and incoherence. Yet amidst these groans, the broken bread and the raised chalice intuit an order beyond present disorder. The priest's questions have not vanished, nor has the dislocation been magically resolved. After all, "questioning" is a present participle, and the poem's shift to the present tense indicates that these questions continue without ever attaining logical resolution. Yet as poetry is grafted on to the cry from the cross,<sup>107</sup> so the image of overflowing, resurrection light pushes the questions to one side,<sup>108</sup> suggesting that they have been momentarily, miraculously transcended.

These moments of sacramental imagery transcending the darkness are rare in Thomas, but the brief flashes they transmit offer hope for his vocations, which offer an alternative pattern amidst the predominant incoherence of the universe. In the fifth section of the long 'Sonata in X', the speaker describes how he is haunted by the hope of this pattern:

There was something I was near  
and never attained: a pattern,  
an explanation. Why did I address it  
in person? The evolutionists told  
me I was wrong. My premises,  
the philosophers assured me,  
were incorrect. Perpendicular  
I agreed, but on my knees

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<sup>106</sup> *Echoes*, p. 69.

<sup>107</sup> Compare "Poems such as the 'terrible' sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins are but a human repetition of the cry from the cross" — R.S. Thomas, 'Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*', p. 50.

<sup>108</sup> The image of overflowing light is used in similar ways elsewhere in Thomas. Compare 'The Bush', 'Gift'. In a similar manner, in 'The Answer' the questions are put aside like Christ's folded graveclothes (discussed briefly in Chapter Four).

looking up, cap in hand,  
at the night sky I laid astronomy  
on one side. These were the spiritual  
conurbations illuminated always  
by love's breath; a colonising  
of the far side of the mind  
without loss of the openness of its spaces.<sup>109</sup>

In his instinctive, childlike simplicity, the speaker here accepts the rebuke which the evolutionists and the philosophers direct at his naive desire for a divine pattern. Yet the weighty opinions of the experts can not destroy his unschooled intuition that there is meaning behind life's chaotic appearances. At such moments, the pattern behind the universe insists on being addressed "in person" and assumes the attributes of love. Seen this way, the richness and the mystery of the universe are restored, and "the openness of its spaces" guaranteed. That which is chaotic and unstructured from one perspective, from another reveals the rich depths of the revelation of divine personality and love. It is to this revelation that poet and priest witness and respond.

### *Conclusion*

Concluding his study of seventeenth century meditative poetry, Martz suggests that not only the poets of his era aim at unity through meditative practices. Rather, he argues,

... in certain eras, under certain conditions of distress and disorder, some poets will inevitably be led to cultivate a unity of interior life through processes of thought that bear some degree of similarity to the meditative exercises of the seventeenth century.<sup>110</sup>

Martz includes Herbert in his seventeenth century pantheon, and he readily admits Hopkins as an exponent of meditative poetry. On these same grounds, Thomas could be included, for his work also grows out of the desire to find unity amidst "conditions of distress and disorder". Of course, there are significant differences in the distresses and disorders which these three poets face. Herbert's poetry considers disorder to stem from the fallenness of the world, experienced especially through the speaker's own sin. Hopkins' prime experience of disorder occurs as he struggles to reconcile his faith with the nineteenth century ideological collapse. He is almost overwhelmed by the fleeting mortality of nature's beauty, by his status as an outsider and by psychological turmoil which threatens the security of his Christ-guaranteed order. Thomas presumes the nineteenth century's abandonment of shared religious experience, but this is not the cause of his upset.

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<sup>109</sup> The "spiritual conurbations" might again echo Hopkins' "bright boroughs" and "circle citadels" in 'The Starlight Night', thereby reversing the possible negative echo in 'The Listener in the Corner'.

<sup>110</sup> Martz, p. 324.

His distress comes instead from the triumph of scientific progress, whose creed denies room to spirituality.

Whatever the variable reasons for their experience of disorder, the fact of that experience is shared and constant. So too, is the attempt in the face of disorder to cultivate what Martz calls "a unity of interior life". Vocation has an important place in that attempt. Herbert finds a vocational place through God's grace, grace found at the board of his friend Christ. This grace gives him eucharistic wings with which to transcend the disorder of sin and dislocation. It charges him, ultimately, with the vocational task of sharing this bounty with others. Perhaps surprisingly for such a sacramentalist, Hopkins' hope is as much eschatological as sacramental. Christ's presence undergirds the world, but faced with disorder and disaster, Hopkins' only option is to clutch after Christ's eschatological triumph. Even though the terrible sonnets raise suspicions about Christ's trustworthiness, it is only on the basis of a heart flung towards Christ in despair as well as security that Hopkins can find hope for himself. His poetry then transmits the hope and purpose that come from Christ to others. Thomas' attempt at unity is less overtly Christ-based than either Herbert's or Hopkins' (although he insists that "Jesus was a poet"). Rather, he finds interior wholeness and unity by waiting for God in the gaps between the here and now, between faith and doubt. When responding to perplexity and pain, in a universe rendered vacuous by science, Thomas sees poets and priests charged with the same task of witnessing to the spiritual and sacramental way, a way that opposes the reductionism of the scientists.

In several ways, not least the recurrence of Christology, this anticipates issues discussed in later chapters. It is first necessary to consider the attitude of these three men to their respective vocations of priesthood and poetry. Thus far, it is clear that each poet is torn between his disordered and incoherent experiences of life, and his need to belong, to find coherence and to respond to his vocational calling. Each poet's work represents an attempt, more or less desperate, to grasp through darkness at the coherence which enables them to establish vocation and justify faith.

## Chapter Two — On being a priest

### *Origins of the Christian Priesthood*

The origins of the Christian ministry are shrouded in, if not quite incoherence, then at least mystery. Certainly, the use of the word “priest” to designate the ordained Christian minister is something of an historic accident. In pagan and Jewish understandings, a priest is a person who offers sacrifice, and that is the meaning of the Greek and Latin words *hierous* and *sacerdos* both translated into English as “priest”. But the New Testament writers regarded all animal sacrifices as superseded by Christ’s sacrifice. Christ is the “paschal lamb” that “has [already] been sacrificed”.<sup>1</sup> His once-for-all sacrifice terminates the human priestly office by ripping wide the temple curtain and opening “a new and living way” to God through the curtain of his flesh (Hebrews 10.20). When the New Testament uses priestly language, therefore, it does so in new ways. Christ is now the great high priest who has replaced the earthly mediators between God and humanity and all who follow him are, because of him, referred to as priests: “ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation . . .” (1 Peter 2.9).<sup>2</sup> Under Christ, all followers of the new way are equals.

Given this theological refutation of an hierarchical priesthood, the presence of priests in the church is surprising. Initially, the early Christian churches were probably organised along the lines already assumed by the New Testament, which mentions three church offices.<sup>3</sup> These offices were essentially pastoral and administrative, and certainly, during the first two Christian centuries, they were not thought of in hieratic terms.<sup>4</sup> A significant shift occurred, however, as those filling the offices of bishop and presbyter began to assume sole responsibility for administering the eucharist. Then, from Tertullian onwards, the Greek word “presbyter” was translated with the Latin “sacerdos”,<sup>5</sup> so that the

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 5.7 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Compare 1 Peter 2.5; Revelation 1.6, 5.10 etc.; Board for Mission and Unity of the General Synod of the Church of England, *The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry* (London: Church House Publishing, 1986), p. 23; *A Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. by J.G. Davies (London: SCM, 1972), p. 287; Compare Donald L. Gelpi, SJ, ‘Priesthood’ in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. by Peter E. Fink SJ (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1990), p. 1015.

<sup>3</sup> Those of bishop/overseer (*episkopos*), elder (*presbyter*) and deacon (*diakonos*) (Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3). *Presbyter* and *episkopos* were probably interchangeable terms for the same office: see Raymond E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (Paramus: Paulist Press, 1970) p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw, ‘Theology and Rite, AD 200-400’, in *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. by Cheslyn Jones and others, revd edn (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 355-362, (p. 355).

<sup>5</sup> In Latin, a *sacerdos* can be either a priest or a general religious official (*The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry*, p. 32.) This translation led to the following sorts of distinction: “In English the term *priest* connotes two distinct religious functions: (1) a cultic, or hieratic priesthood, which mediates the presence of God through

celebration of the eucharist by Christian “priests” developed increasingly sacrificial overtones, eventually leading to the theological belief that the eucharist *re-enacts* Christ’s sacrifice. That was the essential situation in the West during the middle ages, where only priests were permitted to officiate at the sacrifice of the mass. During the Reformation, the Reformers attacked these sacrificial accretions to the biblical office of presbyter. Although the Reformers were less concerned with the priesthood than with the nature and means of receiving God’s grace, their arguments on the sacraments had important implications for the medieval view of the priesthood. Where the Roman Church’s “high view of the Sacraments carries with it a high evaluation of the priesthood”, Davies comments that, on the other hand,

The lower view of the Sacrament . . . is content to regard the presiding minister as first a prophet expounding the divine Word and only subordinately a dispenser of the sacraments. He is not a man of a higher status than other men; he shares the same standing but has merely a different office.<sup>6</sup>

From this assessment of the Christian minister, the Reformers were agreed that “no form of polity is exclusively prescribed in scripture”<sup>7</sup> (particularly the polity authorised by the Church of Rome). They were satisfied if God’s Word was preached, the sacraments administered, and godly order maintained.<sup>8</sup> As the Book of Common Prayer makes clear, the only sacrifice involved in the eucharist is a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving on behalf of the congregation.<sup>9</sup> There was no place in the Reformed Church for the priesthood as understood by Roman Catholicism.

### *Herbert’s theological and historical context*

Herbert’s priesthood was conducted in the wake of these turbulent disagreements. The form of ordained priesthood adopted by the Church of England in the sixteenth century was basically in line with the word-centred theology of the Continental Reformers. Thus, although they were largely indifferent as to nomenclature,<sup>10</sup> the formative Elizabethan divines insisted that the ordained priest was primarily a “minister of the gospel”,<sup>11</sup> and that

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ritual, especially through sacrifice, and (2) the oversight of the Christian community exercised by the presbyter/bishops in the NT and by their successors.” — Gelpi, p.1013.

<sup>6</sup> Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England, Volume II: From Andrewes to Baxter and Foxe (1603-1690)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 287-288.

<sup>7</sup> Norman Sykes, *Old Priest and New Presbyter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Sykes, pp. 8-10.

<sup>9</sup> Compare the Prayer after Communion in the *Book of Common Prayer*: “accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving . . .”;

<sup>10</sup> Hooker considered that “it skilleth not” what the priesthood is called, although his preference was for “presbyter”. Whitgift was of similar mind. See Sykes, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> Whitgift, quoted in Sykes, p. 43.

sacrifice was "no part of the church ministry"<sup>12</sup> because the eucharist was not a sacrifice.<sup>13</sup> In true Reformed manner, early Anglicanism stressed instead the pastoral and preaching responsibilities of its ministers. Under the Elizabethan Ordinal, they were ordained as:

. . . the messengers, the watchmen, the Pastors, and the stewards of the Lord: to teach, to premonish, to feed, and provide for the Lord's family: to seek for Christ's sheep that be dispersed abroad, and for his children which be in the midst of this naughty world, to be saved through Christ for ever.<sup>14</sup>

These emphases are further evident in the symbolic presentations made to ordinands at their ordination. Where the Roman Catholic candidate receives the stole and chasuble, the Anglican ordinand is presented with a Bible. In the Elizabethan Ordinal,<sup>15</sup> he is then enjoined to "Think upon these things contained in this book", to "Give heed unto reading, exhortation and doctrine", and to "be diligent in them, that the increase coming thereby may be manifest unto all men".<sup>16</sup> Thus, although the Anglican priest still presides at the eucharist, the liturgy conceives his duties primarily in word-centred terms that focus on the scriptures and on Christ. Scripture and liturgy are formative for Herbert and vital for his vocational accommodation.

As the seventeenth century progressed, however, Reformed perspectives which had dominated the Church of England's theology were challenged by a counter-revolutionary drift towards Arminianism.<sup>17</sup> Arminianism stressed such doctrines as the reception of grace through the sacraments and so propagated a more Catholic, more sacramental view of the priesthood.<sup>18</sup> Under the growing influence of Bishop Laud (Archbishop by 1633), communion tables became altars and were moved to the extreme east end of churches.<sup>19</sup> Foster, writing of the early seventeenth century, discerns among Anglican ministers a "new found confidence, zeal and heightened sense of what was entailed in being a member of a sacramental priesthood", a change he attributes directly to the spread of Arminianism.

<sup>12</sup> Hooker, quoted in Sykes, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Compare Cranmer: ". . . the use of an altar is to make sacrifice upon it: the use of a table is to serve for men to eat upon. Now when we come unto the Lord's board, what do we come for? To sacrifice Christ again, and to crucify him again; or to feed upon him that was once only crucified and offered up for us?" Quoted by G.W. Bromley, *Thomas Cranmer: Theologian* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> 'The Form and Manner of Making and Consecrating Bishops, Priests and Deacons' (1559) in *Liturgical Services in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. by W.K. Clay/Parker Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1847), p. 288.

<sup>15</sup> This lengthy injunction was omitted from the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Form and Manner of Making and Consecrating Bishops, Priests and Deacons' (1559), p. 297.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Foster, *The Church of England 1570-1640* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), pp. 10, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Jancelot Andrewes was arguing for a high view of the priest's role as early as 1600: see Andrew Foster, 'The Clerical Estate Revitalised' in *The Early Stuart Church 1603-1642*, ed. by Kenneth Fincham (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 139-160, (p. 154).

<sup>19</sup> Compare Foster (1994), p. 38.

Arminianism gave the clergy "a sense of the separate status of the clerical estate".<sup>20</sup> Equally, however, many in the church regarded Arminianism as a retrograde influence leading the English Church back to Catholicism. Certainly, its view of the priesthood contrasts greatly with the earlier Reformed view, in which the clergyman is simply the "presiding minister".<sup>21</sup> These issues had seemed settled in the sixteenth century, but in the mid-seventeenth, they blew the church apart.

Herbert grew up amidst this controversy. He was variously a student, fellow and orator at Cambridge University, centre for much of the theological disputation. Yet his own position on such matters is elusive. 'The British Church' states his clear allegiance to the Church of England, but that still gives him enormous latitude. Strier and Veith consider him thoroughly influenced by Lutheranism and Calvinism,<sup>22</sup> while T.S. Eliot enlists him as a "vigorous opponent of the Puritans and Calvinists".<sup>23</sup> In reality, Herbert's theology was probably essentially reformed, while his practice was resolutely Anglican, a combination which explains his appeal for both Tractarians and Methodists.<sup>24</sup> Yet if Walton is believed,<sup>25</sup> Herbert initially resisted the call to the priesthood in favour of the lure of royal preferment. Given Herbert's lofty social status, this is understandable. Despite arguing for the increased social position of early seventeenth century clergymen, Foster concedes that "the financial rewards of the job remained poor",<sup>26</sup> and Herbert the aristocrat was presumably unaccustomed to its ambiguous social position. That he eventually took orders thus partly justifies Eliot's hagiographical admiration at the fact that Herbert should "be content to devote himself to the spiritual and material needs of a small parish of humble folk in a rural village."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Herbert's poetry shares this stress on sacrificial dedication, and, biography aside, self-sacrifice is vital to the priestly office. In the contemporary liturgical service, the Bishop stresses to ordinands the magnitude of the task awaiting them, and their corresponding need for holiness:

<sup>20</sup> Foster (1993), p. 154.

<sup>21</sup> Horton Davies, p. 288.

<sup>22</sup> Strier (1983), pp. x-xvii and throughout; G.E. Veith Jr., *Reformation Spirituality* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1985), pp. 11-12 and throughout.

<sup>23</sup> T.S. Eliot, *George Herbert* (London: Longman's Green, 1962), p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> For Herbert's influence on Wesley, see Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 121-136. 'The High Anglican Hopkins is clearly influenced by Herbert in, for example, his poem 'New Readings'.

<sup>25</sup> On the suspicion to be accorded Walton's *Life of Herbert*, see Amy M. Charles, *A Life of George Herbert*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) pp. 201-209.

<sup>26</sup> Foster (1994) summarises the research succinctly at pp. 45-53. Quotation from p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> Eliot (1962), p. 11.



ye see with how great care and study ye ought to apply your selves, as well that you may shew your selves kind to that LORD, who hath placed you in so high a dignity, as also to beware that neither you your selves offend, neither be occasion that other offend.<sup>28</sup>

In *A Priest to the Temple*, Herbert sounds a similar note, indicating his respect for the priestly office as an office of "dignity", but a dignity which has theological rather than sociological origins. For the pastor "is the Deputy of Christ for the reducing of man to the obedience of God". He stands in Christ's stead, doing "that which Christ did, and by his aucturity, and as his Viceregent".<sup>29</sup> To some degree, this separates clergy and laity, because it is a serious business to discharge God's promises on God's behalf.<sup>30</sup> Yet Herbert never dwells on the glamour and status of the clerical office. Rather, he focuses on the officer's need to perform humbly his many and serious tasks. Alongside his sacramental duties, his charity, visitation and preaching, he is to be his people's lawyer and physician.<sup>31</sup> Everything he does is directed to the pastoral guidance of his flock. Thus he will lead the people in God's way, knowing that they are "led by sense more than by faith".<sup>32</sup> In this service, Herbert leaves the controversies of his day behind to focus on humbly discharging his dignified office. His liturgical routine of preaching and administering the sacraments is directed always to serving God and developing the spiritual lives of his parishioners.

### *Hopkins' theological and sociological context*

Hopkins' position is very different from Herbert's. Herbert may have lost social status upon ordination, but an Anglican priest still had social dignity. A Catholic priest, however, attracted a mixture of suspicion and hatred from non-Catholics.<sup>33</sup> Catholic Emancipation was only fifteen years older than Hopkins, and when he matriculated at Oxford, a Roman Catholic could not take a degree there. Hopkins' conversion thus involved a momentous change. Reynolds comments that, in the nineteenth century, a "convert was often ostracised by his family and neighbours; his motives were misrepresented; he cut himself off from the past and had to venture into a strange country".<sup>34</sup> Yet Hopkins chose to

<sup>28</sup> 'The Form and Manner of Making and Consecrating Bishops, Priests and Deacons' (1559), p. 288. Despite requests from leading Puritans that the ordinal be changed, no changes were made until 1662, well after Herbert's ordination.

<sup>29</sup> *A Priest to the Temple*, 'Chapter I: Of a Pastor', p. 225.

<sup>30</sup> *A Priest to the Temple*, 'Chapter XX: The Parson in Gods stead', p. 254.

<sup>31</sup> *A Priest to the Temple*, 'Chapter XXIII: The Parson's Completeness', pp. 260-261.

<sup>32</sup> *A Priest to the Temple*, 'Chapter XX: The Parson in Gods stead', p. 254.

<sup>33</sup> See below, notes 34 to 37 for some instances of these responses.

<sup>34</sup> E.E. Reynolds, *The Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales: A Short History* (Wheatthampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1973), p. 329. Compare Pusey's readiness to class Hopkins as a "pervert" for his decision to convert, a word which should be understood in its archaic sense of "apostate", but which nevertheless underscores the depth of feeling involved (see Pusey's letter to Hopkins of 10 October 1866 in *Further Letters*, Appendix

journey further into this strange country by becoming a priest and a Jesuit at that. Jesuits had been feared as the prime agents of a Catholic advance on England since the Counter Reformation, and according to nineteenth century prejudice "designing clerics, usually Jesuits" led astray "[i]nnocent young girls", before despoiling them "of their fortunes and of their chastity."<sup>35</sup> In his 1851 lectures on the position of Catholics in England, Newman caricatures the popular and widespread English misconceptions about Jesuits, including the universal assumption that they are a "crafty, intriguing, unscrupulous, desperate, murderous, and exceedingly able body of men; a secret society, ever plotting against liberty, and government, and progress, and thought, and the prosperity of England".<sup>36</sup> Even among those who otherwise accepted Catholicism, the celibate nature of its priesthood was one of the main grounds for Anglican hostility towards it.<sup>37</sup> Many Anglicans also had theological reservations about the priest's role at the Mass. The priesthood had changed little since the Counter-Reformation when the Council of Trent had affirmed the sacrifice of the Mass and the priest's presiding role at that sacrifice. According to the Ordination Rite of the Tridentine Mass, unchanged between the mid-sixteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, the priest is ordained "to offer Sacrifice" first, and then "to bless, to guide, to preach and to baptize":

With great care then should one advance to so high a state and care must be taken that they who are chosen should be commended for their unworldly wisdom, their blameless life, and their persevering practice of virtue.<sup>38</sup>

This stress on moral purity is no more than the New Testament Epistles of Titus (1.6-9) and 1 Timothy (3.1-13) demand, but there is a slightly greater stress here on the priest's high estate than there is in the rite Herbert underwent. Priests in their "high . . . state" seem to be of a superior spiritual order. Thus, although this liturgy requires the

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III, p. 400. See also the agitated letters of Hopkins' father to Liddon in *Further Letters*, Appendix IV, pp. 434-436 (15 and 20 October 1866)).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Lee Wolff, *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England*, 5th edn (London: Burns, Oates & Company, 1851), p. 17. Compare the comments of Hopkins' friend Bridges to Dixon after Hopkins' death: "He seems to have been entirely lost and destroyed, by those Jesuits" (*The Selected Letters of Robert Bridges* ed. by Donald E. Stanford, 2 vols, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983), vol 1, p. 186 (14 June 1889).

<sup>37</sup> Wolff, p. 4, ranks "the celibacy of the clergy" as one of the three key Protestant suspicions of Catholicism. The other factors he identifies are convents and confession. Compare T.H. Green's comments in a letter to Henry Scott Holland after Holland visited Hopkins at the Jesuit novitiate in Roehampton: "It vexes me to the heart to think of a fine nature being victimised by a system which . . . I hold to be subversive of Family and the State, and which puts the service of an exceptional institution, or the saving of the individual soul in opposition to loyal service to society" (29 December 1868). (*Henry Scott Holland: Memoir and Letters*, ed. by Stephen Paget (London: John Murray, 1921), p. 30). In further correspondence between Holland and Green, Green justifies his comments on philosophical and theological grounds rather than those of prejudice.

<sup>38</sup> English translation in *The Ordination of a Priest* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1940), p. 8.

congregation to approve an ordination,<sup>39</sup> (affirming the principle that the priest is one of the people,<sup>40</sup>) his duties in the sacred mystery of the Mass elevate his position. In uttering the mysterious Latin rite at the consecration of the eucharistic elements, the priest is, uniquely, a conduit between heaven and earth, a difference underlined by his celibacy and his priestly vows. This mystique completes his traditional separation from society.

Yet although Hopkins' vocation placed him outside mainstream English life, it gave him a privileged position within the Catholic world. English Catholics revered priests for keeping Catholic faith alive in England before emancipation. Further, as Russell observes, their separation had advantages. Unlike the Anglican clergy, Roman Catholic clergy were "to a degree set apart from the class structure". They did not have the "family connections, property, and education" which rooted their Anglican counterparts in English social life.<sup>41</sup> Instead, their position and the generally marginal position of Catholics in Britain meant priests could move between different social orders, ministering widely to different people. Catholicism, as the previous chapter suggested, allowed Hopkins to find an alternative coherence in the midst of cultural upheaval.

This helps to explain why Hopkins' surviving prose scarcely refers to the social costs of his decision. His letters give the impression that his decision to enter the Jesuit priesthood, like his decision to convert, was made with excitement. "I am going to enter the Jesuit noviciate at Roehampton," he boldly declared to Liddon, the influential High Anglican: "I do not think there is another prospect so bright in the world."<sup>42</sup> Two years later, after reaffirming his Jesuit vows, he is equally positive to his mother:

. . . I have bound myself to our Lord for ever to be poor, chaste, and obedient like Him and it delights me to think of it.<sup>43</sup>

In correspondence with his close friends, as in an earlier letter to Baillie in 1868, Hopkins is more tentative at the prospect of being "shut up in a cloister". Still, he remains cautiously optimistic, telling Baillie that his decision has given him "a great and real sense of freedom".<sup>44</sup> This letter displays the more guarded tone which marks Hopkins' later attitude to his priestly duties. His respect for the priestly office remains constant, but his

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<sup>39</sup> *The Ordination of a Priest*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>40</sup> As was affirmed at Vatican II: the "ordained ministry . . . is not a different degree of sacerdotal priesthood" but "something essentially different, namely the presbyterate" (Rodrick Strange, 'What's the Difference?', *The Tablet* (1 February 1997), p. 146).

<sup>41</sup> Anthony Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (London: SPCK, 1980), p. 166.

<sup>42</sup> *Further Letters*, p. 49 (to Rev H.P. Liddon, 5 June 1868).

<sup>43</sup> *Further Letters*, p. 113 (to his mother, 10 September 1870).

ordination in 1877 led to a succession of wearying pastoral duties that dampened his exuberance. He wrote to Dixon of "the pressure of parish work" in the heart of industrial Britain which is "very wearying to mind and body".<sup>45</sup> His experiences of Glasgow and Liverpool crushed him with the conviction of "the misery of town life to the poor and . . . of the degradation even of our race, of the hollowness of this century's civilisation".<sup>46</sup>

Thus ordination did not fulfil some aesthetic spiritual quest for Hopkins, nor did it provide him with an idyllic rural parish. Rather, priestly experience confronted him with squalor and misery. It was an experience of exclusion rather than inclusion; not a retreat from the world, but a baptism of immersion into the worst the world could offer. The depression which beset Hopkins in Dublin probably began here, but this only strengthened him in his vows. Having "bound" himself to the Jesuit order, there could be no turning back. Dixon's attempts to dissuade Hopkins from taking his final vows in 1881 are gently but firmly rebuffed:

. . . I should be black with perjury if I drew back now. And beyond that I can say with St Peter: 'To whom shall I go? *Tu verba vitae aeternae habes*. Besides all of which, my mind is here more at peace than it has ever been and I would gladly live all my life, if it were so to be, in as great or a greater seclusion from the world and be busied only with God.'<sup>47</sup>

Having made his vows before God, Hopkins believes his peace can only come through fulfilling them. This insistent commitment is largely responsible for his later problems with poetry, but it shows him fully cognisant of the cost of his decision. The conviction of his priestly cause was greater than his misery.

### *Thomas' theological and social context*

Despite obvious differences of era and temperament, the fact that both R.S. Thomas and George Herbert conducted their ministries within the Anglican communion lends some surprising similarities to their situations. Although ordained three hundred years apart, both would have been urged at the laying on of hands: "be thou a faithful Dispenser of the

<sup>44</sup> *Further Letters*, pp. 231-232 (to A.W.M. Baillie, 12 February 1868).

<sup>45</sup> *To Dixon*, pp. 31, 33, 36 (31 October 1879, 14 May 1880 and 22 December 1880). Compare also *Further Letters*, p. 157 (to his mother, 30 April 1880).

<sup>46</sup> *To Dixon*, p. 97 (1 December 1881).

<sup>47</sup> *To Dixon*, p. 75 (12 October 1881). Compare *To Bridges*, pp. 298, 250 (19 October 1888, 17 February 1887) and Hopkins' correspondence with Bridges about William Addis who, like Hopkins, converted to Roman Catholicism and took orders, but who left the church in 1888. Hopkins reserves no disapproval for Addis' broken vows: "I hope at all events he will not pretend to marry," writes Hopkins. Although marriage is honourable, "the philanderings of men vowed to God are not honourable nor the marriages they end in." *To Bridges*, p. 298 (19 October 1888).

Word of God, and of his holy Sacraments".<sup>48</sup> Though understood differently, the balance between word and sacrament is vital for both of them in their poetry. With his sacramental focus, Hopkins is much less concerned than they with proclamation and clarity, content to let the poetry express its own inscape for its own sake. Herbert and Thomas, in contrast, write a more direct poetry, perhaps rooted in its pastoral context.

Nonetheless, it is also true that the vicar's role has changed enormously over three hundred years. Russell catalogues many functions once performed by the Christian minister which were later assumed by the State or by professional groups.<sup>49</sup> No longer is Thomas' pastoral duty conceived in Herbert's ideal seventeenth century terms where he is also a medic, lawyer, social worker, agricultural advisor and teacher. With the growth of State power and the explosion of the professions in the nineteenth century, the clergyman lost these functions altogether. He became "a man apart", forced to cultivate professional religious skills:

Liturgical and pastoral work . . . were promoted to a position of unchallenged importance. As other professional men became skilled and technically competent . . . so the clergy developed a professional language and refined skills and expertise.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps this is less true of the rural parishes where Thomas worked, but he still writes that his parishioners were "rough and hardened farmers who expected more from him than he could give".<sup>51</sup> One suspects that Thomas might have thrived in the seventeenth century, because it would have given him something to do instead of agonising about theology. Instead, amidst people of very different social status, he is classically a man apart.

Moreover, Thomas' isolation was exacerbated by his political status as a Welsh nationalist in the Church in Wales. Davie observes that:

Welsh nationalists . . . sometimes conceive of the Anglican Church in Wales as profoundly alien, an ecclesiastical extension of the English drive, sustained through centuries, to subjugate Welsh culture to English. To be a Welsh patriot while serving as priest of what was originally and is persistently an English church — this is the anomaly, as some see it, of the condition that R.S. Thomas chose and lived with.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> "The Form and Manner of Making and Consecrating Bishops, Priests and Deacons" (1559), p. 202; *The Book of Common Prayer*, 'The Ordering of Priests'.

<sup>49</sup> Russell, throughout, but particularly p. 233.

<sup>50</sup> Russell, p. 235.

<sup>51</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Neb' or 'No-one' in *Autobiographies*, trans. by James Walford Davies (London: J.M. Dent, 1997), p. 53.

<sup>52</sup> Donald Davie, 'R.S. Thomas's Poetry of the Church in Wales', in *Miraculous Simplicity*, pp. 127-139 (p. 131).

Thus in Wales, "the Anglican church is scrupulously described as the Church not *of* Wales but *in* Wales."<sup>53</sup> If anything, it is the non-conformist churches which have the greatest claim to be the church *of* Wales.<sup>54</sup> Thomas shows himself aware of this tension from the earliest stirrings of his nationalist tendencies. An early essay, 'Dau Gapel (Two Chapels)' reports how, attending Mass in Ireland, he yearns for a similarly indigenous religious expression in Wales, "longing for some small chapel like this in the Welsh hills, with its small congregation of sober down-to-earth people".<sup>55</sup> The yearning tone is for a non-conformist "chapel", not a church, for, as Thomas readily concedes, in the quest to "discover the true soul" of the Welsh people, nonconformity "wins hands down".<sup>56</sup> Nonconformists are "more loyal to their language"<sup>57</sup> and nonconformity admirable both for its "independence of the Englishness of Anglicanism and its opposition . . . to the English State."<sup>58</sup> Catholicism is too formal and ostentatious for the Welsh, while his own denomination, he says, "isn't any longer Welsh enough in Spirit" to speak to the Welsh soul.<sup>59</sup> Still, although knowing that he was fighting against the tide, Thomas attempted to maintain a Welsh language orientation within his church,<sup>60</sup> even if championing the Welsh cause exacerbated his status as "a man apart".

Further isolation arises from the fact that Thomas' ministry occurred in a century largely indifferent to Christianity. In Herbert's time, as the last chapter suggested, the priest performed his duties within an assured frame of Christian reference. Increasingly, however, as Russell says,

. . . the clergyman's role is performed within a society which no longer accepts the Christian framework of transcendental order within which Western European society and culture were formed, or the moral universe in which all acts both personal and social were once evaluated.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Davie, pp. 130-131.

<sup>54</sup> The imported character of the Church in Wales was recognised in the Welsh Church Act of 1914, which disestablished the Church in Wales from 1920; an acknowledgement, perhaps, of the strength of non-Conformist congregations. See G.J. Cuming, *A History of Anglican Liturgy*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 224-225; *Modern Anglican Liturgies 1958-1968*, ed. by Colin O. Buchanan (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 160.

<sup>55</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Dau Gapel (Two Chapels)' (1948), trans. by Catherine Thomas, in *R.S. Thomas, Selected Prose*, pp. 37-40 (p. 39).

<sup>56</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Dau Gapel (Two Chapels)', p. 39.

<sup>57</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Autobiographical Essay', pp. 15-16.

<sup>58</sup> Ned Thomas and John Barnie 'Probing: An Interview with R.S. Thomas', in *Miraculous Simplicity*, pp. 21-46 (pp. 24-25).

<sup>59</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Dau Gapel', p. 39.

<sup>60</sup> Such action includes deliberately moving to Welsh language parishes, his resistance to English encroachment in the Church and letters in Welsh to the Church in Wales' paper, *Y Llan (The Church)*, which advocate a distinctly Welsh, pacifist role for the Church. See Tony Brown, "'On the Screen of Eternity': Some Aspects of R.S. Thomas's Prose", in *Miraculous Simplicity*, pp. 182-199, (pp. 183-184).

<sup>61</sup> Russell, p. 261.

Although Russell argues that this climate has forced the clergy to find a niche by stressing their specialised spiritual and sacramental functions, this presumes that they consider those functions valid and important. But Thomas, “bedevilled by doubts and uncertainties”,<sup>62</sup> is not exempt from the doubt which has swept into society since the nineteenth century. The previous chapter sketched how integral doubt is to Thomas’ poetry, but in his priestly capacity it meant subjugating his personal uncertainties to his professional role as a priest. Thus, in his words:

As long as I was a priest of the Church, I felt an obligation to try to present the Bible message in a more or less orthodox way. I never felt that I was employed by the Church to preach my own beliefs and doubts and questionings.<sup>63</sup>

If Thomas’ tendency was to use the priestly office to mask his personal doubts and questionings, he nevertheless let them loose in his poetry:

... the tendency was for me to become more absorbed with my own spiritual and intellectual problems and to see what poetry could be made from them.<sup>64</sup>

This chapter is concerned primarily with priestly vocation, but already the signs are up that Thomas is more certain of poetry as the arena for his spiritual work. He does not really know what to do with his priestly office, but he has few such doubts about poetry as his ‘Introduction’ to the *Penguin Book of Religious Verse* shows. There, he unashamedly casts the poet as the prime mediator of the “ultimate reality beyond human attainment”,<sup>65</sup> but he is much less certain about his priestly vocation. Perhaps with tongue in cheek, he nevertheless describes his entry into the ministry as, quite literally, a heaven-sent opportunity for writing poetry:

Who can deny the finger of God? It may have been a disaster for other people, but it was a blessing for me that I entered the church. Talk about the parson’s freehold! It has given me time, which is the most necessary of all to a poet. . . .<sup>66</sup>

The public, religious role of the priest has dwindled here until the priesthood is simply the perfect setting for the composition of poetry. Yet, he has not forgotten religious activity. As poetry merges into priesthood, both of them in Thomas’ scheme become religious activities. From the fringes of society, forgotten by his century, the priest-poet continues to make his priestly proclamation from the margins.

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<sup>62</sup> Justin Wintle, *Furious Interiors: Wales, R.S. Thomas and God* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 419.

<sup>63</sup> R.S. Thomas, ‘Autobiographical Essay’, p. 17. Similar thoughts are expressed in a private communication to me, dated 26 December 1996.

<sup>64</sup> R.S. Thomas, ‘Autobiographical Essay’, p. 17.

<sup>65</sup> R.S. Thomas, ‘Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*’, p. 49.

<sup>66</sup> Ned Thomas and John Barnie, ‘Probings’, p. 24.

*Thomas — the priesthood of lonely perseverance*

The marginal figure of the priest sketched above matches the image of the priest projected throughout R.S. Thomas' poetry. Thomas' poems rarely reflect on the theology underlying the priesthood as Herbert's do. Instead, they describe pastoral situations where theological disquiet lurks offstage, setting the tone for the portrait of the lonely parson, uneasy amongst the earthy existence of his parishioners and helpless in the face of their inevitable suffering. Where Herbert debates whether anyone is worthy to perform the priest's vital task, Thomas' pastoral experience leads him to question its very necessity. This leads to a poetry which oscillates in tone between muted acceptance and deep resentment at the priest's lot. Only when he clearly sees himself as following in Christ's way does the priesthood seem to have any hope of justification.

'Country Cures' is typical in its description of the priest's isolation and loneliness. Where the title suggests the priest's cure of souls, the ensuing portrait of clerical figures confirms that it is the clergy, not their parishioners, who need healing.<sup>67</sup> The octet describes "lost parishes" (6) which seem to reflect the desolate mental state of the clergy. In these bleak places,

... the grass keeps  
No register and life is bare  
Of all but the cold fact of the wind. (6-8)

With their blank registers and insistent wind, these "lost parishes" are more reminiscent of cemeteries than places of spiritual healing. Indeed, the twilight world of this poem contains no parishioners to receive treatment. Instead, the measured tone of the poem's opening sentence applies the curing scalpel to the soul of a representative cleric, who has been "sent" on a rest cure to a sparse, purgatorial world to "make" his soul (1-2),

In long hours by the poor light  
Of a few, pale leaves on a tree  
In autumn or a flower in spring ... (3-5)

The poem's faint hope seems to be that this halfway world, surrounded by the stark beauties of nature, will provide some kind of healing. Yet there is not much hope on offer in this bleak environment, and patience seems the only benefit to be gained. In the sestet, the poem assumes an air of confession as the narrator recalls his personal knowledge of such desert experience. Thomas, in life tall and gaunt, is recognisably the model for

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<sup>67</sup> Compare *Echoes*, p. 100, where the priest must retire from his "cure" just when approaching spiritual "health".



... the lean men,  
Whose collars fasten them by the neck  
To loneliness . . . (9-11)

Indeed, despite the distance the narrator puts between himself and the clergy, this is clearly the lonely man apart of Thomas' professional experience. If so, it appears like a miserable business, as the poem's muted hope for patience diminishes beside the suggestion that the parsons' lives are meaningless.

I hear them pacing from room to room  
Of their gaunt houses ; or see their white  
Faces setting on a blank day. (12-14)

They change nothing and heal nothing, merely observing the passing of each day.

Unless a priest can be his own parish, there is no parish in 'Country Cures'. Yet, even the appearance of parishioners in other poems offers little justification for the priest's existence, and little solace from his dominant experience of loneliness. If anything, the distance between parishioner and priest re-enforces the priest's loneliness and gives him further cause to doubt the basis on which his ministry stands. This is true of most of the portraits of parishioners in Thomas' poetry. Some generate sympathy for the speaker and some for the parishioner. Others launch stinging attacks on parishioners, attacks which, whether justified or not, create a decidedly unappealing air of superiority about the priest and suggest that his work achieves little. This hint of superiority is apparent in 'The Country Clergy', which casts its priests as "Venerable men" (3), if a little dusty in their "holy mildew" (5). Their dignity elicits respect, not least because of the "sublime words" which they write on "men's hearts and in the minds/Of young children".<sup>68</sup> These are presumably the words of scripture, sermon and liturgy, but the poem draws attention to their aesthetic sublimity rather than their wisdom or salvific impact. This again suggests that the Anglican context is an ideal seedbed for a poet, but it raises doubts about the substance of the priestly office. Nevertheless, despite these doubts, he maintains clear ideas about the respect due to the clergy, ideas which radiate an unnerving elitism. The speaker regrets, with no real hint of irony, that the venerable men are

Toppled into the same grave  
With oafs and yokels. (7-8)

For this indignity, he can only hope that God "will correct" the misunderstandings he has had to suffer (11-12). This superiority in a poem which otherwise attempts neutral observation is disturbing, so that Phillips' reservations are in order:

Not only do we find a priest saying that he is superior to oafs and yokels and should not share their graves, but we also find him expressing the hope that God will recognise those truths through correction! . . . Here is a conception of God who shares the priest's sense of class distinction in heaven . . .<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps this superiority simply masks the priest's sadness that the clergy are now irrelevant, part of the poet's wider lament "over the decay of Christian culture" which he believes noble but irretrievable.<sup>70</sup> The clergy are disappearing without memorial, and all the poet can do is compensate for this by exalting their memory.

Although restrained in this poem, the superiority of 'The Country Clergy' receives blistering expression elsewhere. In 'A Priest to His People', an aesthetically-minded priest-speaker directs a violent harangue at his unsophisticated peasant parishioners, but his vitriol condemns only himself. The exasperation of the priest's tirade is understandable given that he, university-educated and professional, is faced with people whose life is rooted in the crudities of the soil. Yet although his parishioners may quite literally be "wantoners" and "sweaty females", these labels will not aid understanding between them. As soon becomes clear, however, the speaker is not interested in understanding:

How I have hated you for your irreverence, your scorn even  
Of the refinements of art and the mysteries of the Church . . . (3-4)

I have taxed your ignorance of rhyme and sonnet,  
Your want of deference to the painter's skill . . . (23-24)

It is only grudgingly that the priest acknowledges the people's rustic beauty: "speech" which contains "The source of all poetry" (25-26) and "laughter" as "sharp and bright as a whipped pool" (13-14). Perhaps the reason for his reluctance is revealed here, for acknowledging their beauty leads him to acknowledge their essentially pagan spirituality, which in its turn challenges the authority of his church:

. . . your strength is a mockery  
Of the pale words in the black Book,  
And why should you come like sparrows for prayer crumbs,  
Whose hands can dabble in the world's blood? (19-22)

The "crude tapestry" of peasant life (35) mocks the substance of the church's belief, and the speaker seems to fear that those who dabble in the sacramental wells of the world's blood do not require the services of a mediator, especially one whose middle class sophistication excludes him from this primal religious power. Yet this attitude only

<sup>68</sup> Alluding to Deuteronomy 6.6-9 (which, ironically, stresses family and community life, rather than Thomas' detached and isolated priest) and Ezekiel 36.26-27.

<sup>69</sup> D.Z. Phillips, p. 38.

<sup>70</sup> Tony Conran, *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. 195. Conran labels this "a very bad poem" and describes the speaker's attitude as "indulging himself" in his lament for the passing of Christian culture.

exposes the priest's theological problems. For, despite his vague nods towards the sacraments and scripture, his aesthetic religion is simply an effete version of his peasants' paganism. Elevating art and sonnet over any doctrine or compassion means that, in his understanding, the mysteries of the church have nothing to offer his people which they do not already have.

The irate speaker of 'A Priest to His People' is not Thomas, although his rancour probably has seeds in Thomas' experience. For other poems which do not ridicule the speaker also display a respect for the farm people's spirituality which threatens to undermine the priest's duties. 'Affinity' affirms one peasant who "has the world for church", and who stands in the "woods' wide porch" in order to hear the birds of "God's choir/Scatter their praises" (13-16). This frolicsome involvement with nature is enough for the speaker to insist that the peasant's name "is written in the Book of Life" (7), though his religion conspicuously lacks any pastor or priest. In 'Absolution', the nature priest usurps the ordained priest's role as the bearer of God's absolution (a role vital to the priest in Herbert's 'The Priesthood'). The archetypal peasant, Iago Prytherch, presides at nature's "stone altar on which the light's/Bread is broken at dusk and dawn" (2-3). Before the slow gesture of this Wordsworthian peasant, ordinary roles are reversed: the speaker receives forgiveness from the pre-lapsarian peasant for the "thin scorn" with which he "strafed" Prytherch and his kind.

None of this respect survives into 'The Calling', however, a poem even more rancorous than 'A Priest to His People'. Its cataclysmic tirade against the futility of the priest's task extracts the feelings of resentment and unease latent in all Thomas' pastoral poetry, adds a dose of mythopoeia and creates a vision of horrific possibility. The bulk of the poem is contained in a "word" that comes from some unspecified supernatural being: "was it a god/spoke or a devil?" (1-2). Immediately, the confused source of the message alerts the reader to the tenor of what is to come. Priests may claim that their calling comes from God, but given its ineffectuality and mixed results, this poem suggests that it may equally be diabolic. If the calling is evil, the whole concept of vocation is upended. Certainly, it is difficult to derive any affirmative, God-instilled meaning from the nihilistic whirl of unprofitable ministry which the poem describes. "Go," commands the imperious, ambiguous voice,

to that lean parish; let them tread  
on your dreams; and learn silence

is wisdom. Be alone with yourself  
as they are alone in the cold room  
of the wind. Listen to the earth  
mumbling the monotonous song

of the soil: I am hungry, I  
am hungry, in spite of the red dung  
of this people. See them go  
one by one through that dark door

with the crumpled ticket of your prayers  
in their hands. Share their distraught  
joy at the dropping of their inane  
children. Test your belief

in spirit on their faces staring  
at you, on beauty's surrender  
to truth, on the soul's selling  
of itself for a corner

by the body's fire. Learn the thinness  
of the window that is  
between you and life, and how  
the mind cuts itself if it goes through. (3-24)

The motifs here are familiar from 'A Priest to His People' and other poems. Yet the venom of this poem is unprecedented. Phillips reprimands the poet for "the regrettable effect of adding to the pain".<sup>71</sup> Perhaps; but this is the poem's point and the poet has undoubtedly achieved exactly his desired effect. Thus Davie describes the poem as "savage" and notes that it demands we revise our notions of how a Christian priest may contemplate his flock without transgressing "either Christian charity or pastoral care".<sup>72</sup> But the poem has surely passed far beyond that. It is closer, perhaps to Herman's musings (about a different poem) that Thomas' work represents a "betrayal" of his priestly identity.<sup>73</sup> The poem seems to deny that the priest can ever instil hope, offer guidance or share love. Experience deals a severe blow to any belief that his ministry is rooted in the service of a loving God. The poem thus suggests that the priest may be utterly mistaken as to the source of his calling. For the deity ruling the world of this poem is Mother earth, a pagan tyrant who demands lives of pointless sacrifice from the people. In such a world, the priest is a complete misfit, the archetype of loneliness, consigned to his "lean parish" as a spectator at the relentless cycle of the seasons, the spawning of dozens of inane progeny and the capitulation of the soul to pragmatism. Faced with this, the horrible

<sup>71</sup> Phillips, p. 99, alluding to Thomas' poem 'Petition'.

<sup>72</sup> Davie, p. 130.

<sup>73</sup> Vimala Herman, 'Negativity and Language in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas', *ELH*, 45 (1978), 710-731 (p. 710).

possibility remains that his calling comes from an evil source, which would make him complicit in that evil. Alternatively, even if his call comes from a loving God, the earth's brute reality defies anyone, God included, who deals in anything but base matter. Any attempt to bridge the gap between himself and life's brutal reality leads only to the savage laceration of the spirit on the glass that separates priestly illusion from real life.

'The Calling' must be caricature, but it seems to draw on the priest's real feelings of hopelessness and non-identification with his parishioners. Ordinarily, Thomas' peasant poems are detached, empirical observations of the peasants in which moments of contact between priest and peasant are very rare.<sup>74</sup> 'Encounter' is exceptional in that it explicitly identifies an encounter between priest and farm labourer. The narrator observes the labourer "Working calmly at the grave's edge", extracting the fields' "gold coinage of oats and wheat", when the contact occurs:

He saw me then, my tall shadow  
Fell with the old ambivalence  
Of the priest over his slow path  
Skyward, and our glances met  
Over the mows, the weeds, the years  
With brute glumness, while history passed  
Noisily by us on steel wings.

This is perhaps an encounter, but it does little to change the dominant mood of the peasant poems. Observer and specimen exchange glances, but the 'Encounter' of the title is an ironic sham. Indeed, the unbridgeable gulf between the "old ambivalence" of the priest and his subject is widening as the steel wings of industrialisation drive the priest further into the past. There is no hostility towards the priest, but nor is there any point of contact. It is the farmer, not the priest, who, living at the grave's edge and possessing the treasures of earth, deals in the true currency of life and death. Self-contained and self-sufficient in his own world, he is neither interested nor in need of what the priest represents.

Indeed, throughout the peasant poems, whether the farmer is praised or criticised, there is a complete separation between him and the priest.<sup>75</sup> The harsh, mangled reality of farming life questions fundamentally the nature of the God in whom the priest believes. 'They' states this dilemma extremely poignantly.<sup>76</sup> The priest stands in the place of God, who, if

<sup>74</sup> Anne Stevenson, 'The Uses of Prytherch', in *The Page's Drift: R.S. Thomas at Eighty*, ed. by M. Wynn Thomas (Bridgend: Seren, 1993), 36-56 (p. 46), suggests that the speaker of these poems is usually a priest, even though he is very rarely identified as such.

<sup>75</sup> Compare, for example, 'Chapel Deacon', 'The Minister', 'Affinity' and 'Valediction'.

<sup>76</sup> Compare 'There', which explores similar territory.

omnipotent, could presumably alleviate the people's suffering. Yet suffering continues, so that the priest's decision to continue in God's service astounds even himself:

I take their hands,  
Hard hands. There is no love  
For such, only a willed  
Gentleness. Negligible men  
From the village, from the small  
Holdings, they bring their grief  
Sullenly to my back door,  
And are speechless. Seeing them  
In the wind with the light's  
Halo, watching their eyes  
Blur, I know the reason  
They cry, their worsting  
By one whom they will fight. (1-13)

A faint air of superiority towards these "Negligible" people lingers here, but it does not deteriorate into diffidence. Rather, the speaker declares his *desire* to love them, to cultivate an attitude of "willed" gentleness and to take their side in the battle against the nameless God, the apparently indifferent "one whom they will fight". But it is a battle of Lilliputians against giants. For:

Daily the sky mirrors  
The water, the water the  
Sky. Daily I take their side  
In their quarrel, calling their faults  
Mine. How do I serve so  
This being they have shut out  
Of their houses, their thoughts, their lives? (14-20)

This is the fundamental dilemma for Thomas' priests. They are caught between the sky and the water, between heaven and earth, God and the people. The "being" he serves does nothing to prevent the people's ceaseless, commonplace suffering, so that he fully understands their decision to shut God out of "their houses, their thoughts, their lives". Yet his position remains awkward. Even though adopting their quarrel as his own, he is concurrently "in the bound service of a crucified God".<sup>77</sup> No wonder his fellow humans are ill at ease with him, for he serves one whom they have, with cause, rejected. He is therefore a lonely and seemingly failed mediator, unsure of the priesthood's traditional answers, understanding those who shut God out of his life, and tempted to do so himself.

These feelings of inadequacy gain a local habitation in the visitation poems.<sup>78</sup> As in 'Evans', there is no satisfactory response to the waves of suffering which toss everyone

<sup>77</sup> A.M. Allchin, 'The Poetry of R.S. Thomas: An Introduction,' *Theology*, 73 (1970), 488-495 (p. 490).

<sup>78</sup> These poems are emphatically biographical: "Pity would well up in him as he visited the sick in their comfortless beds under the slates." 'Neb', p. 63.

onto the shores of death. Similarly in 'The Mill', the visiting priest can only recount the insignificant detail in the dying miller's home as a counterpoint to his decline:

I read him the psalms,  
Said prayers and was still.  
In the long silence  
I heard in the drawers  
The mice that rustled;  
In the shallow grate  
The small fire's petals  
Withered and fell. (36-43)

As the man dies, the slow rhythm echoes the slow turning of the mill. So too does the "rusty mill/of the [speaker's] mind" (49-50). His closing statement shows the effect such suffering has on his faith: "It was I it ground" (51). The priest can but cling to the hope that the psalms, the prayers and the stillness are not wasted, though all around him, life's winter stalks.<sup>79</sup>

Yet often even these rituals seem hopeless. Davie compares Thomas with Betjeman, who delights in religious ritual, often for its own sake. For Thomas, in contrast,

... the worship has a religious significance, or none at all; and to judge from his poems "none at all" is the bleak verdict that his demanding consciousness often passes on his priestly endeavours.<sup>80</sup>

On the whole, indeed, he portrays a ministry in which the priest is sundered from his parishioners, and powerless to help them. His poetry observes the death of forgotten souls, recounts lost sermons and visits to resentful parishioners. Undergirding this helplessness is a profound uncertainty about the purpose of the priestly vocation. It could be entirely meaningless; perhaps God is indifferent or unloving. At such times, the calling to Christian priesthood seems threatened by Romantic values learned from the peasants and from the earth. The priestly office then seems to be about little more than aesthetics which are irrelevant before the tide of storms and death.

Together, the poignancy of such moments is almost unbearable. Yet Thomas never quite despairs absolutely. Indeed, the autobiographical prose/poetry collection, *The Echoes Return Slow* contains several reflections on the priest's role which, despite the usual feelings of frustration and powerlessness, nevertheless show hope for the priest's calling, if not his

<sup>79</sup> Compare e.g., 'Priest and Peasant' and 'The Survivor'.

<sup>80</sup> Davie, p. 131.

situation.<sup>81</sup> One poem<sup>82</sup> casts Thomas as the “vicar of large things/in a small parish” (1-2), beset by the small-minded spiritual darkness of his people:

... I was there,  
I felt, to blow on ashes  
that were too long cold. Often,  
when I thought they were about  
to unbar to me, the draught  
out of their empty places  
came whistling, so that I wrapped  
myself in the heavier clothing  
of my calling, speaking of light and love  
in the thickening shadows of their kitchens. (12-21)

The gulf separating the vicar from his parishioners here is Thomas’ standard fare, but the retreat into the cloth of his calling suggests a confidence in his role which is ordinarily lacking. Indeed “light and love” return throughout *The Echoes Return Slow* as if in witness to the biographical fact that Thomas is unbowed by his frustrations. To the end of that volume, it is the speaker’s experiences of love which remain of fundamental importance as he pursues his voyage to God, unable to decide whether his ministry has assisted anyone else to make the same journey. Ultimately, however, he has no alternative to that ministry’s silent witness. This much emerges in ‘Poste Restante’ and ‘The Moon in Lleyn’ in which, as seen in Chapter One, the priest remains faithful to his calling despite the decline which he observes in his daily routine. In ‘Poste Restante’, the priest pulls on the “hoarse bell nobody/heard”, while a spider has made its home in the chalice and the wine lies “cold and unwanted/by all but he” (16-17, 19-22). Similarly, in ‘The Moon in Lleyn’, “the bell fetches/no people to the brittle miracle/of the bread” (12-14), and indeed, sounds like the death-knell of his own vocation. He feels that:

Religion is over, and  
what will emerge from the body  
of the new moon, no one  
can say. (18-21)

Yet, though the sacraments are defiled and nature has begun unsentimentally to take back its own,<sup>83</sup> the priest cannot escape his calling even in the face of decay. This silent witness anticipates the priest-poet’s prophetic opposition to his age that is discussed below in Chapter Four. And indeed this silent witness provides some hope. ‘Poste Restante’ wonders whether the cross might shine “brightly/as a monument to a new era” rather than grind “into dust/under men’s wheels” (3-4). ‘The Moon in Lleyn’ likewise closes on

<sup>81</sup> Other passages from *Echoes* relevant to Thomas’ ministry are found at pp. 16-17, 24-25, 46-47, 52-53, 54-55, 56-57, 62-63, 90-91, 96-97, 103.

<sup>82</sup> *Echoes*, p. 25.



a hopeful note with an unidentified, Herbert-like voice speaking in direct contradiction to the unidentified voice in 'The Calling'.<sup>83</sup> This voice challenges the speaker's pessimistic conviction that religion is headed for the abyss, once again commanding patience amidst the gloom:

Why so fast,  
mortal? These very seas  
are baptised. The parish  
has a saint's name time cannot  
unfrock.  
...  
You must remain  
kneeling. Even as this moon  
making its way through the earth's  
cumbersome shadow, prayer, too,  
has its phases. (23-27, 32-36)

With a deft shift of perspective, the voice exposes the priest's earth bound, temporal understanding. The priest's service is not in vain, but testifies quietly to the spiritual way which will return. In the meantime, as so often in Thomas, the speaker is compelled to learn patience on his knees.

There is thus something important and durable in the priest's faithful performance of his duties. Even as he doubts, by continuing to visit, to pray and to administer the sacrament, his symbolic service is a counterpoint to the poems' text of doubt and despair that bears silent witness to his calling. It is, as Chapter Five suggests below, the way of the cross. This is supremely evident in the humble resignation of 'The Priest', a poem which expresses this quiet hope. The end of the poem places a blistering critique of the priest's vocation in the mouth of the cynical reader:

'Crippled soul,' do you say? looking at him  
From the mind's height; 'limping through life  
On his prayers. There are other people  
In the world, sitting at table  
Contented, though the broken body  
And the shed blood are not on the menu.' (20-25)

The speaker does not disagree with this critique. Rather, in gracious words that smell of the beauty of holiness, he accepts it:

'Let it be so,' I say. 'Amen and amen'. (26)

Concluding the poem, this acceptance chimes like a benediction to hallow the poem's account of the priest's parish visitation, as he picks his delicate way through his

<sup>83</sup> "The sand is waiting/for the running back of the grains/in the wall into its blond/glass" (15-18). Sand is indeed piled up against the sea-facing wall of the church at Aberdaron, in places above window height. Wintle (pp. 317, 323) provides background information on the church's history.

<sup>84</sup> Both poems were published in the 1975 volume, *Laboratories of the Spirit*.

parishioners' resentment. "He goes up" to visit alone and "He comes down slowly", equally alone (15, 17). Yet amidst this rejection, 'The Priest' hints at a possible theology of priesthood. Loneliness and scorn from the sceptic are to be expected and the priest can only counter these with the knowledge that his ministry follows Christ's lonely footsteps "over the broken glass" (12) of commitment. He pays for his people's correction with the "sweat's coinage" (14), as Christ's payment for humanity's correction began with drops of sweat like blood. Together these and other hints (the hearts that want "him to come near" (4), the flesh that "rejects him" (5),<sup>85</sup> the "growing birches" and the "lambs" (16)), enable Jasper to say that, as the priest serves the "painful sacrificial meal of the Holy Communion", he is embodying Christ's ministry "and following in His way".<sup>86</sup> Morris' suggestion that this poem shows Thomas having "at last made peace with the status and function of his calling",<sup>87</sup> is surely largely attributable to the security of Christ's model.

Oblique though the reference to Christ is here, the centrality of the eucharistic sacrament to the priest's duties and to Thomas' poetry confirms Christ as model for the priest's task. For along with his visiting, his main task is the administration of the "broken body" and "shed blood" to those few broken people who will accept them. These elements remember the hope that life and communion spring from rejection and scorn, just as the anamnesis of the priest's own lonely life recalls and embodies the way of Christ. Although the priest's questions remain, amidst the questions the "simplicity of the Sacrament [absolves] him from the complexities of the Word".<sup>88</sup> To repeat a priestly passage quoted in the previous chapter:

... He lifted  
the chalice, that crystal in  
which love questioning is love  
blinded with excess of light.

It is ultimately the priest's deliberate performance of these actions that ignites the poems of his vocation with their faint promise of faith, hope and love.

### *Herbert — the preparation within*

The Anglican context, noted above, may define Herbert and Thomas' duties in a similar manner, but it does not give them the same theology of the priesthood. Thomas claims an

<sup>85</sup> Compare, for example, John 1.11: "his own received him not".

<sup>86</sup> Jasper (1988), p. 29.

<sup>87</sup> Brian Morris, 'The Topography of R.S. Thomas', in *Miraculous Simplicity*, pp. 47-60, (p. 58).

<sup>88</sup> *Echoes*, pp. 68-69.

interest in Herbert, but admits, tellingly, that he is attracted to the Anglican discipline “as demonstrated in George Herbert’s life rather than his writing”.<sup>89</sup> Where Thomas persists in lonely endeavour without certainty that his ministry has any meaning, Herbert places theology first and considers priestly practice to flow from that. Any theological justification for Thomas’ ministry must be found by following Christ humbly to the cross, but Herbert justifies his priesthood by appealing to the office of Christ triumphant. Before Christ’s departure from earth, writes Herbert in *A Priest to the Temple*, “he constituted deputies in his place, and these are priests”, charged by him “to do that which Christ did, and after his manner, both for doctrine and life”.<sup>90</sup> Practice for Herbert flows directly from theology, for doctrine and life are inseparable. Herbert is thus never conceited about the majesty of being called to act in the stead of the man-who-is-God, because his theology insists on the enormity of the calling and every person’s unworthiness for it. This is reflected clearly in his poetry. Thus, where *A Priest to the Temple* tells *what* a priest should do in his bustling parish life, ‘The Church’ poems ask *why* and *how* it should be done. In ‘The Church’, the wide scale of *A Priest to the Temple* narrows to focus on the parson’s soul as he confronts his priestly vocation, his God and himself.

*The Temple* is not just concerned with questions of the priestly vocation, however. Shaw observes<sup>91</sup> that Herbert’s thinking on vocation fits within Paul’s general injunction to all believers in Ephesians 4.1, that they walk “worthy of the vocation wherewith [they] are called”. Everyone has a vocation; that is “common ground” for all believers which then takes on a particular form for each individual. In Herbert’s case, this involves the “specialized functions of priest and poet”.<sup>92</sup> Yet, as noted above, Herbert apparently struggled to accept the priestly part of his calling. This biographical struggle may lie behind ‘Affliction’ (1) and ‘The Crosse’, but the theological parameters of the struggle are outlined in ‘The Priesthood’. The poem’s speaker assumes that someone must fulfil the priestly office, but he stands outside it, dissuaded from joining by the awesome responsibilities it carries. Surely no human is fit to loose and bind, to lift “to the sky” or throw “down to hell” (2-3), operations which the priesthood performs in its “just censures” (4). The speaker is also convinced that he is “much unfit” for dealing “in holy Writ” (11-12), and especially for administering the eucharist. For in the eucharist, mere

<sup>89</sup> Ned Thomas and John Barnie, ‘Probing’, p. 24.

<sup>90</sup> *A Priest to the Temple*, ‘Chapter I: Of a Pastor’, p. 225.

<sup>91</sup> Robert B. Shaw, *The Call of God: The Theme of Vocation in the Poetry of Donne and Herbert* (Cambridge MA: Cowley, 1981), p. 73.

<sup>92</sup> Shaw, p. 73.

men ("holy men" admittedly (25), but men nonetheless) presume to "serve him up, who all the world commands" (26). The thought that the hands of these holy men must "convey him, who conveys their hands" (28) leaves the speaker floundering, musing repeatedly in his astonishment at the holiness of the priests' hands:

O what pure things, most pure must those things be,  
Who bring my God to me! (29-30)

But the speaker here is labouring under a theological misconception. Throughout, *The Temple* insists that no one is holy enough to deal with God. To that extent, the speaker's assessment of his inadequacy to assume priestly attire is exactly correct. For, as he says of the office:

... thou art fire, sacred and hallow'd fire;  
And I but earth and clay: should I presume  
To wear thy habit, the severe attire  
My slender compositions might consume. (7-10)

But this assessment applies universally, even to priests. For in reality, "holy men of God" are as much "earth and clay" as the speaker. His naïveté masks the true nature of the priestly office, which only consumes because of the one who fuels the fire. The burning bush of Exodus 3.2 and the words of Hebrews 12.29 ("For our God is a consuming fire") stand in the background. There is only one possible origin for the priesthood's incinerating habit. The purging, Nessian shirt of Eliot's 'Little Gidding' suggests a parallel:

Love is the unfamiliar Name  
Behind the hands that wove  
The intolerable shirt of flame<sup>93</sup>

Thus, although the naive speaker does not make the identification, the poet knows that God lies behind this fiery office. This identification becomes clearer when the fire image merges with imagery of pottery. Recalling that "skilful artists" combine fire and clay to make deluxe pottery (17-18), the speaker ponders whether the fire behind the priesthood might transform his "earth and clay" into a worthy vessel for serving at the eucharist. Although he fails to recognise that the priesthood itself does not transform earth into vessels fit for service, the reader sees that he must learn, like Jeremiah, that God is the potter who moulds human clay as he sees fit.<sup>94</sup> God's consuming fire will have its way with the speaker, and since God turns earth into both bread and humanity, the speaker cannot protest that he is inherently unworthy for the priesthood. The priest is in one sense the clay "dish" or "vessel" from which the eucharistic "meat" is served (19-21), and

<sup>93</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding* IV.

<sup>94</sup> "O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel" (Jeremiah 18.6)

so he is the equal of the carthy "feeder" who receives from him. God's economy admits of no pride in human status, least of all in the priest's role. He fashions the vocation of his servants, and all of them — be they priests, "great ones" (19) or humble — are clay in his hand. Both prospective priest and layperson can but submit to God, waiting for his call:

Onely, since God doth often vessels make  
Of lowly matter for high uses meet,  
I throw me at his feet. (34-36)

Shaw draws attention to the Levitical requirement that the vessel carrying a sin-offering must be broken after use (Leviticus 6.24-30), and links this with St Paul's use of "earthen vessel" imagery to describe those who preach the gospel (2 Corinthians 4.7). By utilising these sources, Herbert the poet is stressing that the "mediator between God and his people" must be a broken vessel whose ministry involves "a life of sacrifice". Only by humbly "dying" to the world can he be a means of "bringing others to life in Christ".<sup>95</sup> All followers of Christ must die to worldly conceptions of status, sacrificially submitting their clay to God's fiery purposes.

'The Windows' similarly stresses the need for sacrificial humility in priestly service, this time with a focus on preaching. Like the speaker of 'The Priesthood', its speaker is amazed that any mortal should presume to preach God's "eternall word" (1), because man "is a brittle crazie glasse" (2). Here, however, the speaker understands that God must correct his vision if he is to understand the way God uses his servants:

Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford  
This glorious and transcendent place,  
To be a window, through thy grace. (3-5)

The speaker is still puzzled and amazed that God will use such inadequate creatures as he, but unlike his counterpart in 'The Priesthood', he has learnt that God's grace and empowering stand behind effective preaching. Thus, addressing his Lord, he remembers that

... when thou dost anneal in glasse thy storie,  
Making thy life to shine within  
'The holy Preacher's; then the light and glorie  
More rev'rend grows, & more doth win:  
Which else shows watrish, bleak, & thin. (6-10)

Without Christ's agency in the preacher's glass, his sermons and his doctrine are plain and uninspiring. Just as only Christ's fire can fashion the speaker's clay into eucharistic service, so only his light can illumine the dull window of the speaker's rhetoric into life-giving

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<sup>95</sup> Shaw, p. 94.

words. Christ is not explicitly mentioned here, but he comes into view in the final stanza which insists that “speech alone” is insufficient for the preacher’s task. Instead, just as “colours and light” combine in a stained-glass window, so must the preacher’s “Doctrine and life” (11). This same phrase is used in a passage from *The Country Parson*, quoted above, where the parson’s model “both for doctrine and life” is Christ.<sup>96</sup> The priest it seems can only discharge his function by following Christ’s sacrificial example and receiving his grace, in doctrine and in practice. As Chapter Three discusses, this appeal to a person’s life is Herbert’s customary test for true sanctity.<sup>97</sup> To be effective in his vocation, the follower of Christ must live like him.

Only in ‘Aaron’, however, is Christ explicitly identified as the author of the priest’s vocation and as the indwelling presence necessary for any effective ministry. God does not simply call the priest, but, as ‘The Windows’ says, Christ must shine within him. Like ‘The Priesthood’ and ‘The Windows’, ‘Aaron’ begins by rehearsing the glory and dignity of the priestly office. This time the office is contrasted against its typological precursor, the inaugural Jewish priest, Aaron:

Holiness on the head.  
Light and perfections on the breast,  
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead  
To lead them unto life and rest.  
Thus are true Aarons drest. (1-5)

Neither Thomas nor Hopkins provide such a crisp theological summary of the priestly ideal. The ideal priest is a holy leader of God’s people. He takes over the Jewish priest’s function of leading his people into life and rest, words which possess particular overtones in the Christian dispensation. For “life” in all its fullness is what Jesus promises in John 10.10, while the book of Hebrews holds out “rest” for those who have faith in him, the “great high priest” (Hebrews 4.3-14). Under Christ triumphant, who has literally raised the dead, the priest should likewise lead his people out of spiritual deadness.

Again, however, the speaker stumbles against his own unworthiness. Through retention of the first stanza’s rhyme words, the speaker’s shortcomings are contrasted sharply with the ideal of the previous stanza:

<sup>96</sup> Above n. 89.

<sup>97</sup> Compare *A Priest to the Temple*, ‘Chapter XXXIII: The Parson’s Library’, p. 278: “The Country Parson’s Library is a holy Life”.

Profaneness in my head,  
 Defects and darknesse in my breast,  
 A noise of passions ringing me for dead  
 Unto a place where is no rest.  
 Poore priest thus am I drest. (6-10)

In the terms outlined by 'The Priesthood', this ministry is clearly failing. Holiness and purity were there established as vital attributes of the priest, and they are here corrupted by "passions" and "darknesse". Just as he feared in 'The Priesthood', he in his sinfulness simply cannot do what the task requires. Yet the third stanza is alive with rumours of an escape from this bind. Here, the agitated end-stopping of lines ceases, the pace quickens and hopeful hints are provided as to the identity of the priest's tailor:

Onely another head  
 I have, another heart and breast,  
 Another musick, making live not dead,  
 Without whom I could have no rest:  
 In him I am well drest. (11-15)

The echoes of Pauline body imagery, the whispers of resurrection, and the promise of Hebraic rest all prepare for the thunderous and affirmative advent of the fourth stanza:

Christ is my onely head,  
 My alone onely heart and breast,  
 My onely musick, striking me ev'n dead;  
 That to the old man I may rest,  
 And be in him new drest. (16-20)

"Onely" Christ can answer the priest's dilemma. For he does not simply accept the priest's service; he guarantees the priest's ability to serve, providing the cloak of holiness which the priest requires in order to serve adequately as Christ's deputy. The habit of fire from 'The Priesthood' is clearly now the habit of Christ. And Christ does not simply weave the cloth of holiness, but as Galatians 3.27 makes clear, he is the cloth. He lives in and with the aspiring priest,<sup>98</sup> and with a change of image, he is the signature tune which enables the priest to direct his people:

So holy in my head,  
 Perfect and light in my deare breast,  
 My doctrine tun'd by Christ, (who is not dead,  
 But lives in me while I do rest)  
 Come people; Aton's drest. (21-25)

Alongside his own frailty and inadequacy, the priest is sure he can fulfil the task to which he is called because his doctrine is "tuned by Christ", with Christ's all-sufficiency at its centre. Only then can he turn his attention to his ministry, sure that his effectiveness does not depend upon his personal worthiness. Herbert points out in *A Priest to the Temple* that Hannah received the blessing of Eli, even though Eli was "a man disallowed by God",

<sup>98</sup> Compare Galatians 3.27: "As many of you have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ".

because "it was not the person, but Priesthood, that blessed".<sup>99</sup> In the same way, the parson's invitation to his parishioners is really the invitation of Christ, the great high priest. The people can only come when Aaron is dressed in him.

Ultimately, therefore, the poem returns the reader to Christ. The priest is only Christ's Vice-regent and deputy. He is not the detached figure of Thomas' poetry, ministering in a community where he is not fully welcomed. Rather, Herbert's priest is among his people, a sinner like them, bearing to them Christ's invitation to Christ's table. Since the office and invitation are Christ's, there is nothing special about the priest as a person and no essential difference between him and the laity. Strier reflects that "since the main characteristic of the true priest is holiness, ['Aaron'] becomes an exposition and celebration of how the Christian attains holiness or righteousness". This, in Herbert's mind, is true for priests and laity, for "the conditions for being a "true priest" [are] basically identical with those for being a true Christian."<sup>100</sup>

This has profound implications for every individual Christian's vocation, as 'The Elixir' details. In the arrangement of 'The Church', 'The Elixir' comes shortly after two eucharistic poems, 'The Invitation' and 'The Banquet', extending the lessons of 'Aaron' beyond pulpit and altar to affirm and sanctify "all professions, secular as well as religious";<sup>101</sup>

Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things thee to see,  
And what I do in anything,  
To do it as for thee: (1-4)

As the remainder of this poem makes clear, all callings can be hallowed if lived in the light of this alchemical formula. As in 'The Windows', this first requires a change in perception.<sup>102</sup> Individuals must make God "prepossest" in every action (6-7), and by applying the motto "for thy sake", honour God in everything. This principle sanctifies the whole of existence, so that even sweeping a room, if swept for God, "makes drudgerie divine". This principle represents true alchemy. It:

... is the famous stone  
That turneth all to gold:  
For that which God doth touch and own  
Cannot for lesse be told. (21-24)

<sup>99</sup> *A Priest to the Temple*, 'Chapter XXXVI: The Parson Blessing', p. 285.

<sup>100</sup> Strier (1983), p. 127.

<sup>101</sup> Shaw, p. 83.

<sup>102</sup> Shaw, p. 84.



From God's perspective, all service humbly rendered is considered equally golden. As Christ surrendered his will to God's, priest and sweeper are called to identical submission. *All* "human work is to be carried out in a spirit of praise, and is rendered acceptable by the transforming presence of God".<sup>103</sup> This is not to deny the particular solemnity attached to the priestly office, as the speaker's trembling approach to it in 'Aaron' and 'The Priesthood' shows. Yet in reality, whether Herbert knows it or not, this is really respect for the person behind the office. Ultimately the speaker trembles because the calling is from God, and the office belongs to Christ. The priesthood is only effective because it is "an earthly emulation of Christ's office".<sup>104</sup> Its glory and dignity are attributable to him alone.

'Love (3)', the sentinel at the exit from 'The Church', confirms that while there is nothing special about the individual who assumes the role of priest, there is everything special about Christ who initiates the priest's work. For at the end,<sup>105</sup> the priest is shown to be a servant utterly dependent on the loving bounty of his master. The banquet in 'Love' (3) closes the chain of poems which follows the priest's invitation to his people in 'Aaron', including the explicitly eucharistic poems 'The Invitation' and 'The Banquet'. In this consummating, paradisaical meal, the veil between the temporal and the eternal is withdrawn and the humble glory of the archetypal priest is discerned. In 'The Priesthood' and 'Aaron', the priest was identified as one who serves God up in the eucharist. At the archetypal eucharistic feast of 'Love (3)', even in the face of his host's generosity, the speaker insists on remaining in his serving role ("My deare, then I will serve" (16)). Yet things do not operate thus in the arch and original eucharist. The humble submission required by "The Elixir" cannot be forgotten when the Master chooses to serve. 'Love' (3) is thus the final reminder to all of the absolute humility required before Christ. At this feast, servants, including the priest, are served<sup>106</sup> by the priestly figure of Love. Love serves at the final eucharistic banquet as the priest who "hath . . . appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. . . once offered to bear the sins of many".<sup>107</sup> Christ's ultimate act of service involved breaking through the temple curtain into the Holy of Holies

<sup>103</sup> Shaw, p. 90.

<sup>104</sup> Marion White Singleton, *God's Courtier: Configuring a Different Grace in George Herbert's Temple* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 157.

<sup>105</sup> The end, because 'Love (3)' closes 'the Church' sequence and, concluding the sequence of the four last things ('Death', 'Doomsday', 'Judgement', 'Heaven'), 'Love (3)' has definite eschatological and paradisaical overtones — see Vendler, pp. 24 and 59. Vendler's point is well made, provided one remembers that the eschatological promise spills over into the temporal.

<sup>106</sup> Compare Vendler, pp. 59, 276.

(Hebrews 10.19-20). Yet the gospel curtain is also the flesh of the great High Priest. Access to God's presence is costly. For Christ, it involved the ultimate breaking and tearing. It is this sacrifice, remembered in the priest's central eucharistic duty, which the priest must emulate.

Thus, as it was for Thomas, Herbert's experience of the priesthood is an experience of the margins, but it also, more obviously, fits within the conception of a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Whether Walton's report about Herbert's court hopes is believed or not, his poetry shows that he considers the priest to surrender and sacrifice himself totally to Christ. Because Christ instituted the priest's functions, to be a priest is to stand in his stead, and this is to invite suffering as well as glory. Yet it is not to invite failure. For, despite human unworthiness to live up to Christ's calling, Christ himself makes up the shortfall in human ability, living in and working through his servants. This applies to all vocations, whether they be pursued by priests or laypeople. Just as in the previous chapter, where God's grace was enough to lift his followers out of the disorienting experiences of the world, so his grace works here, calling all those who follow him and integrating their work into his alternative order. Ultimately, as 'Love' (3) suggests, the priest's yearnings will be sated and his sufferings will come to an end. In the meantime, the wine of the eschatological promise spills through the torn curtain into the present perplexing age, and the priest offers it in anticipation of Christ's heavenly banquet, where God's love will humble all human distinctions of status, and priests will no longer be required.

*Hopkins — the heart of the Host, the heart of the cosmos*

As a Roman Catholic priest, Hopkins is even more a man apart than Herbert or Thomas. Yet this never threatens his total conviction about the importance of his priestly vocation. His oeuvre contains neither Thomas' despairing pastoral poems nor Herbert's poems of vocational anxiety. For him, the priest's task is securely anchored within an integrated Catholic universe. Thus his poems of priesthood focus less on his own position than on the necessity of devotedly serving the people whom he encounters in his ministry. Only in the late poems does Hopkins' integrated universe display signs of fracture, but by then, his hand is gripping the plough too firmly for him to contemplate turning back.

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<sup>107</sup> Hebrews 9.26, 28.

Shortly after converting, Hopkins noted that "the silent conviction that I was to become a Catholic has been present to me for a year perhaps . . . in spite of my resistance to it".<sup>108</sup> The evidence of Hopkins' pre-conversion poetry supports this silent conviction and suggests an ineluctable movement from conversion to ordination, in deliberate reaction, as Chapter One suggested, to the disintegration of nineteenth century world-views. The movement towards Catholicism is evident in Hopkins' Oxford poetry which, under High Church influence, is fascinated with medieval spirituality, celibacy and monastic orders.<sup>109</sup> Once inside the Catholic communion, these fascinations had a natural outlet, and Hopkins was soon corresponding with Newman about a possible religious vocation,<sup>110</sup> either with the Benedictines or the Jesuits.<sup>111</sup> Conversion was followed swiftly by thoughts of ordination.

Ordinarily, the Catholic Church does not require its ordinands to feel any "special interior intimation or illumination".<sup>112</sup> Yet 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', which Hopkins encouraged Bridges to read as autobiography,<sup>113</sup> suggests that Hopkins might have had some such intimation. Indeed, the poem's first part can be read as if the twin outcomes of conversion and priesthood result from a single decisive call. Certainly, the poem's exultant opening contains echoes of the priest's role as it recollects some momentous occasion. The second stanza, bursting with excited alliteration, recollects the speaker's ecstatic response to God's calling:

I did say yes  
O at lightning and lashed rod;  
Thou heardest me truer than tongue confess  
Thy terror, O Christ, O God;  
Thou knowest the walls, altar and hour and night . . . (9-13)

The chiming of "yes" and "confess" indicates some re-orientation or conversion experience.<sup>114</sup> "Confess" might additionally imply the sacrament of penance, while the

<sup>108</sup> *Further Letters*, p. 27 (to Rev. E.W. Urquhart, 24 September 1866).

<sup>109</sup> e.g. 'A Voice from the World', 'St Thecla', 'The Habit of Perfection', 'Heaven Haven'.

<sup>110</sup> *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. by Charles Stephen Dessain, 31 vols (London: Thomas Nelson, 1972), Vol. XXIII, p. 395, Vol. XXIV, pp. 31, 73.

<sup>111</sup> *Journals*, p. 165, 7 May 1868.

<sup>112</sup> Alfred Thomas, SJ, *Hopkins the Jesuit: the Years of Training* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 10, n. 3, states that the Church requires only "a right intention", the necessary qualities, and a free call to ordination from a bishop.

<sup>113</sup> Hopkins wrote that "what refers to myself in the poem is all strictly and literally true and did all occur; nothing is added for poetical padding" *To Bridges*, p. 47 (21 August 1877). Of course, autobiographical readings are hazardous, particularly when recommended by the author.

<sup>114</sup> Norman. H. MacKenzie, *A Reader's Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), p. 35 recognises that "The particular incident behind stanzas 2 and 3 cannot be identified with certainty, but the vigil in the chapel is more likely to have concerned his choice of the priestly vocation or Jesuit order than his conversion, or entry into the noviciate".

"lashed rod" suggests flagellation, which Hopkins almost certainly practised before his conversion.<sup>115</sup> These are Ritualistic practices which lined the route to Hopkins' profession of Catholic faith. Conversion might be hinted at in the fact that the speaker's profession is made at the "altar", the place of sacrifice, for the sacrificial view of the sacrament was vital to Hopkins' Catholicism.<sup>116</sup> Perhaps, further, the centrality of the altar in this confession draws him towards becoming a priest who presides at that altar. Certainly, the altar features prominently in the Psalm used at the commencement of the Tridentine Mass. After the versicle stresses the guidance of God's "light" and "truth", the proper response is:

And I will go unto the altar of God;  
to God who giveth joy to my youth.<sup>117</sup>

The connection between the "altar" and the priesthood receives further support in the third stanza where the speaker recalls his heart's "dovewinged" flight "to the heart of the Host" (22, 21). The flight is impelled by the dove of the Holy Spirit, and it is a flight to the Host, the sacrament of the eucharist.<sup>118</sup> Every Christian, as Herbert would insist, joins the host's banquet, but for Hopkins, it is the priest who stands at its "heart", consecrating and distributing the host on behalf of the great Host. As the speaker flies to the Catholic faith, he flies also to the priesthood.

The close interlocking of these calls is comparable to the poem's portrayal of God's claim on St Augustine. God can call humanity with the suddenness of "an anvil-ding/And with fire" (73-74) as he called St Paul, or as he called Augustine, slowly, "stealing as Spring", with "a lingering out sweet skill" (75, 78). God's "lingering-out" call drew St Augustine from his conversion to a bishopric. Hopkins' call seems to have involved a similar lingering-out, double calling to Catholicism and to the Jesuit priesthood. Christ "scores [his mark] in scarlet himself on his own bespoken" (173), and as he calls, so the convert priest follows. "Over again", Hopkins' speaker says to God, "I feel thy finger and find thee" (8). Not that he finds God, but that he feels God's finger on his shoulder as God finds him, drawing him along with his continual and intimate pull.

<sup>115</sup> For the probability that Hopkins had experimented with flagellation while at University, see Martin, p. 94.

<sup>116</sup> See Chapter One, n. 39.

<sup>117</sup> Psalm 43.4 in the non-Catholic version. The version given here is the translation of the Latin given in *The Ordination of a Priest*, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> I do not know if it is at all significant that the pyx used to store the reserved sacrament was often fashioned in the shape of a dove.

A similar but more surprising conflation of conversion and vocation recurs in 'Carrion Comfort' which emerges from Hopkins' much later teaching sojourn in Ireland. The language of 'Carrion Comfort' looks back to the priestly vocation,<sup>119</sup> for as the speaker reflects on the turmoil of his life he invokes the rod again and notes that:

... in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,  
Hand rather, my heart lol lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, cheer. (10-11)

Ordinarily, "kissed the rod" is taken to mean "accepted depression, despair as a test set by God",<sup>120</sup> and Hopkins' own prose is cited in support of this reading. For he notes that "every cross is a help' towards greater spirituality",<sup>121</sup> and the relationship between "rod" and rood/cross strengthens this reading.<sup>122</sup> So too does the Bible's use of the rod as the image for discipline and hence maturity.<sup>123</sup> Yet kissing the rod might also be applied to conversion and ordination. For in Psalm 23 God's rod and staff comfort the Psalmist in his journey through the valley of the shadow of death, so that kissing the rod might signal a similar determination to submit to God's guidance in all the stages of his life, conversion and ordination included. These stages are evoked when the speaker recalls an apparently specific occasion, or perhaps occasions, on which he kissed some unspecified rod or hand:

Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,  
Hand rather . . . (10-11)

To whom do the hand and rod belong? Certainly, in line with Psalm 23, the rod belongs to God and kissing it indicates a desire to follow his guidance. Yet it is also traditional to greet a Bishop by kissing his ring. For the Catholic priest, this greeting has specific associations with the ordination Mass, where newly-ordained priests present lighted candles to the Bishop, "kissing his hand as they do so". They then consecrate particles of the host, and "Before receiving Communion, each one kisses the hand of the Bishop which holds the Particle".<sup>124</sup> Thus the hand kissed in 'Carrion Comfort' casts back to the speaker's ordination. He therefore traces his toil and coil to his priestly service (kissed the hand) as well as to the ordinary Christian's struggles (kissed the rod). These are virtually inseparable in the speaker's own mind, for, in Hopkins' case, the calling to faith *is* a call to the priesthood, wherever that call might lead.

<sup>119</sup> Donald McChesney, *A Hopkins Commentary: an Explanatory Commentary on the Main Poems 1876-89* (London: University of London Press, 1968), p. 37 also links 'The Deutschland' and 'Carrion Comfort'.

<sup>120</sup> Phillips, p. 375.

<sup>121</sup> Phillips, p. 375 and MacKenzie (1981), p. 175, pointing to *Sermons*, p. 256.

<sup>122</sup> Compare 'The Halfway House' (1865), lines 7-8: "My national old Egyptian reed gave way;/I took of vine a cross-barred rod or rood."

<sup>123</sup> Compare Proverbs 13.24, 1 Corinthians 4.21 which associate the rod with discipline, and 1 Corinthians 11.32, Hebrews 12.6 and Revelation 3.19 which affirm that discipline of the Christian is God's prerogative.

<sup>124</sup> *The Ordination of a Priest*, pp. 24, 38.

This difficult experience separates Hopkins' mature understanding of the priesthood from the romantic colloquy of nuns, monks and saints which adorns his earlier poems. These figures are solitary, like the priest in *Thomas*, but the youthful Hopkins views their isolation solely as an attractive escape from the world into a foretaste of eternity. The simple, plaintive language of 'Heaven-Haven', for example, radiates an enticing and insistent yearning for the heaven of its title. The speaking nun has "desired to go . . . /To fields where flics no sharp and sided hail" (1, 3), out of the reach of storms (6, 8). 'The Habit of Perfection', 'St Thecla' and 'St Dorothea' evince similarly romantic desires for other-worldly life in this life. After Hopkins entered the Jesuit noviciate, however, his practical experience replaced this sentimental approach to the religious life with a theology defined by the priest's serving role,<sup>125</sup> often in unforgiving conditions. His earlier interest in religious orders remains, but the religious life is re-examined and its characteristics redefined to focus on commitment rather than glamour. The nuns in 'The Deutschland' exemplify this commitment in a poem which stresses that absolute submission to God's sovereignty is necessary if one is to outride the calamities that beset the world. For as seen in Chapter One, Hopkins considers God the universe's master tactician, the "Ground of being" to whom total obedience is due. God is the tall nun's "master" (146), the "martyr-master" (167) who even arranges her death. Her response to that mastery is approved by the speaker for it heralds the climactic moment in which Christ's mastery is unveiled. He must be followed, by nuns, by Jesuits, by all people, "last or first" (62), to the point of death:

. . . There then! the Master,  
*Ipre*, the only one, Christ, King, Head: (220-221)

Hopkins considers that following one who was himself "obedient unto death" (Philippians 2.8) will require the application of the principle of sacrifice in completely different arenas.<sup>126</sup> This is the experience of the Jesuit lay-brother, St Alphonsus Rodriguez, subject of Hopkins' late poem, 'In Honour of St Alphonsus Rodriguez'. Outwardly, Alphonsus' career is entirely unglamorous, involving "years and years" of "world without event", while all the time "in Majorca Alfonso watched the door" (13-14). Yet, these years spent in apparently wasted watching are, in fact, pearls of great price. They mask a world of spiritual battle within, in which Alphonsus' faithfulness exceeds the flashy exploits of trump and arms to which honour is usually accorded. As God weaves the glories of

<sup>125</sup> Compare John Pollen SJ's description of "Jesuit obedience" as "the characteristic virtue of the order" in *Alfred Thomas*, p. 31. On this, *Thomas* is instructive throughout, particularly pp. 27, 31 and 41.

nature "with fine increment" (10), he also values Alphonsus' similarly quiet service. The parallels with Hopkins' situation are clear. Frustrated and unhappy in Dublin, the poet hopes that God will value his faithful service.

Hopkins' conviction of the centrality of sacrifice marks his entire mature output. Although it is clearest in works concerned with religious vocation, it is also fundamental to the nature poems, most obviously 'The Windhover'.<sup>127</sup> There, as Gardner suggests, sacrifice is common to the "chevalier", Christ, and the Jesuit 'soldier of Christ': "Because of the sacrifice, the fire that breaks from the plodding priest and inhibited poet is all the 'lovelier' in the eyes of Christ".<sup>128</sup> Obedience to the calling of Christ requires sacrifice from the priest, and in making this sacrifice, he is following Christ's sacrifice, the choice Christ made before the foundation of the world.<sup>129</sup> He is thus sharing in the secret of the universe, finding his place in the sacrifice which exists at the universe's heart, in Christ through whom all things were made. By finding his place in the universal harmony, the priest, like the windhover, glorifies God.<sup>130</sup>

This theology of obedience and sacrifice has important implications for the terrible sonnets. These implications are considered further in Chapter Four, but it is relevant to note here that the sonnets represent the complaints of an utterly aggrieved but also utterly committed servant. Having heard his master's call and wagered everything on following him, there is never really any question that the speaker of the sonnets will abandon the master's service. His situation is similar to that of Herbert's speaker in 'Affliction' (1), who contemplates abandoning God's service altogether, seeking "Some other master out" (64), but immediately realises that this would be a complete rejection of the commitment that underlies his very being, because God remains his "deare God" to whose service he is bound (65-66). God remains his "*deare* God", so that *not* loving God, the source of his service and object of his affection, is never a real option. Hopkins' terrible sonnets, similarly, cry out to the "Comforter", to "dearest him", to "my God", even when God

<sup>126</sup> Pick, pp. 100, 115, stresses the importance to Hopkins of the principle of sacrifice.

<sup>127</sup> Compare also 'The Starlight Night', which suggests that the pulsating, revelatory beauty of the starred skies can be somehow purchased with the unusual currency of "Prayer, patience, alms, vows" (9), echoing the priest's sacrificial vows to poverty, chastity and obedience.

<sup>128</sup> W.H. Gardner, 'The Religious Problem in G.M. Hopkins', in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: the Critical Heritage*, ed. by Gerard Roberts (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 373-383, (p. 378).

<sup>129</sup> For Hopkins' interesting speculations in this connection, see *Sermons*, pp. 197, 290; Chapter Five, n. 20; Jeffrey B. Loomis, *Dayspring in Darkness, Sacrament in Hopkins* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1988), p. 22.

<sup>130</sup> Pick, pp. 71, 119.

seems to deserve none of these epithets.<sup>131</sup> Indeed, it is the intractability of the servant's resolution, even when the Master's service has turned sour which gives the sonnets their heart-wrenching pathos.

Before this vocational test, however, Hopkins' poetry shifts to observe humankind from the priest's perspective.<sup>132</sup> This results in poetry which is secure, even delighted,<sup>133</sup> in the priest's functions. As a resolute adherent to the doctrine of transubstantiation, his service at Mass is central to this delight. This is most obvious in 'The Bugler's First Communion' which suggests that eucharistic service is the priest's *raison d'être*. Contemplating the "tufts of consolation" (25) which administering a first communion will give him, the speaker muses delightedly that,

... so I in a sort deserve to  
And do serve God to serve to  
Just such slips of soldiery Christ's royal ration. (26-28)

The use of "deserve" here is somewhat puzzling, yet it may re-affirm his security in his capacity (his "sort") as a priest, the office which fits him to administer communion. For he has the power of the keys,<sup>134</sup> and his hands have been bound together by "sealing sacred ointment" (33). Alternatively, "deserve" may refer to the joy that he derives from the task. Those who truly rejoice in the administration of the sacraments are those who "deserve" to serve.<sup>135</sup> Either way, both the joy at observing the faith of a newcomer to the sacrifice of the Mass and the associated hope of his mature spiritual fulfilment are clear:

Nothing else is like it, no, not all so strains  
Us — freshyouth fretted in a bloomfall all portending  
That sweet's sweeter ending . . . (29-32)

The priest-speaker's evident joy and confidence here stem directly from a clear conviction of the efficacy of his task. Admittedly, he entertains doubts about the future of the boy, and his doubts have led him to assault heaven with his prayers for the young communicant (145-146). Nevertheless, he remains confident that the boy is "bound home", even if he "rankle and roam/In backwheels" before arriving (42-43). This is poles apart from R.S. Thomas' poems where parishioners are faithfully visited, but the benefit of such visits is

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<sup>131</sup> 'No Worst' (3), 'I Wake and Feel' (8), 'Carrion Comfort' (14).

<sup>132</sup> Pick, p. 87.

<sup>133</sup> Of course, it is not always delighted. The sacrifice can go awry through an excess of asceticism, something discussed in chapter four. Compare David A. Downes, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Study of His Ignatian Spirit* (London: Vision Press, 1959), p. 133 on the tendency to seek something to sacrifice, even if no sacrifice is required.

<sup>134</sup> Compare *Sermons*, p. 235: "... there is a key here which unlocks heaven and brings Christ from heaven out. This key is in my lips. I have the power . . .".

<sup>135</sup> Compare the word's etymology. *Deserve* is derived from Latin *deservire*, "to serve devotedly".



continually doubted. By contrast, Hopkins' poems exhibit a firm confidence in the priest's role, particularly his Catholic role as the purveyor of effectual grace in the sacraments. Rather than the deep division between the priest and his parishioners that sometimes rives 'Thomas' work, Hopkins' poetry enacts a close harmony between them. There is never the scorn for his parishioners that mars some Thomas poems.<sup>136</sup> Assured of his theological function, the priest is liberated to serve, oblivious to the unbridgeable sociological divisions or resentments that afflict Thomas. Thomas' speaker in the desolate 'Evans', for example, is helpless in the face of Evans' death. He was appalled, he says, by

... the dark  
 Silting the veins of that sick man  
 I left stranded upon the vast  
 And lonely shore of his bleak bed. (13-16)

He can only leave the dying man stranded before the darkness of death, helpless before the elemental tragedies of human life. Hopkins' 'Felix Randal', by contrast, is entirely free from the feelings of redundancy which pervade many comparable Thomas poems. There is pathos in both poets, but Hopkins' pathos contains some hope because the priest is able to "comfort" his parishioner, and to quench his tears as he dies (10). This comfort is rooted in the priest's place in the church's sacramental life. Thus the speaker, casting his mind back over the cure of Felix's soul, remembers the sacramental attention he gave Felix:

Sickness broke him. Impatient, he cursed at first, but mended  
 Being anointed and all; though a heavenlier heart began some  
 Months earlier, since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom  
 Tendered to him. . . . (5-8)

Although the priest can do nothing to stop Felix's physical death (2-4), his spiritual awakening is directly attributable to the sacrament of holy communion and the administration of extreme unction.<sup>137</sup> As Christ's body is the ransom offered to God for the souls of humanity, so receiving it in communion grants the sick man "reprieve" from his spiritual death,<sup>138</sup> preparing him for death and the hope of heavenly rest. With this hope in view, the speaker can commit Felix ("blessed" in Latin) to God: "Ah well, God rest him all road ever he offended!" (8).

Doubtless, sociological and historical factors are important in the difference between Hopkins and Thomas. Yet Herbert's example demonstrates the importance of theological

<sup>136</sup> e.g. 'The Visit' or *Echoes*, pp. 47, 53.

<sup>137</sup> "... this is called one of the last sacraments, but it is not meant for death only; rather it is meant for life, to raise up from sickness and to save life . . ." *S.*, p. 248.

<sup>138</sup> McChesney, p. 111.

conviction in defining the priest's role. The socio-economic gulf between Hopkins and his urban parishioners, as also between Herbert and his country people, would have been every bit as pronounced as the gulf between Thomas and his Welsh farming parishioners. Yet Hopkins' pastoral poetry displays an optimistic hope in the efficacy of his service utterly different from Thomas'. Like Herbert ("Come people"), he is *theologically* convinced that the priest has a necessary role to play in his parishioner's lives.

As if in proof of this, the solace of 'Felix Randal' is not only for the dying. Rather, it records a dual operation of God's grace. The priest too has a place in the sacramental universe. He is touched by this sickness and, by extension, by all sicknesses:

This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.  
My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,  
Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal;      (9-11)

Both comforter and comforted are located in a nexus of beneficial relationships. In this, although Felix Randal was a powerful and mature blacksmith, the priest unthinkingly casts himself as father to the blacksmith's "child" (11). The tone of paternal concern springs naturally from the priest's proper functioning among his people.<sup>139</sup>

The tone of Hopkins' pastoral poems suggest that Hopkins was happy in this role among his people. There is a note of fulfilment in a letter to Bridges which discusses 'The Handsome Heart' and touches on 'The Brothers' and 'The Bugler's First Communion': "I find within my professional experience now a good deal to work on".<sup>140</sup> There is a satisfying completeness in the idealised picture of a Jesuit moving freely between various social worlds: teaching schoolboys in 'The Brothers', administering communion at 'The Bugler's First Communion', visiting the gentry 'In the Vale of the Elwy',<sup>141</sup> ministering to the sick in 'Felix Randal', rewarding his servers in 'The Handsome Heart'. He is much more certain within this role than the priestly figure ever is in Thomas (even when that figure mirrors Christ's ministry), certainly much happier than he was in Ireland. Ironically, however, it is when the priest is safe in the stronghold of Catholic Ireland that the pastoral poems' vision of an assured role in a stable Catholic universe begins to collapse. The optimistic conviction that the heart will return as taught to "its own fine function" (as in 'The Handsome Heart' (7)) is completely missing from a poem written in Ireland like, say,

<sup>139</sup> The same harmonious picture is evident in 'The Handsome Heart', where the mantle of "high hallowing grace" (11) swathes both the gracious child and the priest in its care.

<sup>140</sup> *To Bridges*, p. 86 (14 August 1879).

<sup>141</sup> Although written shortly before Hopkins' actual ordination in 1877.

'To Seem the Stranger'. There, at the biographical level, he is removed from England (now recognised as the "wife" to his "creating thought" (6)), and his cheerfully delineated social role is replaced by agonised and sundered loneliness. The Catholic people of Ireland are strangers, and Christ, previously the master whom the priest was pleased to follow, now offers discomfiting sword, strife and parting. Removed from active ministry and consigned to teaching, Hopkins becomes "Time's eunuch", unable to "breed one work that wakes" ("Thou Art Indeed Just" (13)). The overtly priestly dimension of his function has been suspended. There are no simple worthies, no Felix Randals and Harry Ploughmen to whom he can minister.<sup>142</sup> Without this sacramental and explicitly theological role to play, he is consigned instead to "hard wearying wasting wasted" years of teaching.<sup>143</sup> Thomas might have enjoyed this life. He would have had less cause to agonise over whether his role was achieving anything. For Hopkins, it represents wasted years, although the gain to the reader of his poetry was immense.

### *Christ, humiliation and poetry*

To Herbert's mind, all Christians are Aarons, so that the task of the ordained priest is simply that of following Christ, the task which all have in their vocations. All are hallowed, because all come from God. To be sure, the ordained priest's calling is special insofar as it involves high responsibilities for things no one else does. Yet Herbert would insist that this does not reflect well on the priest or his status: it reflects well on Christ. Before the great high priest, everyone is equally humbled and equally exalted. The ordained priest simply points to Christ, summoning others to the banquet where Christ meets and serves all who come to him.

As Herbert's fellow Anglican, Thomas should inherit this equality and community. In fact, however, the breakdown of communal religious experience, Thomas' own theological uncertainties and his status as representative of an imported religious denomination prevent this. Further, in his Romantic uncertainty at Christianity's place amongst people of the land, Thomas feels himself irreparably separated from the labouring farmers by his gentlemanly status. Certainly, his priesthood is far from the inclusive rural vision Herbert outlines in *A Priest to the Temple*. Still, for all his uncertainty that he can connect with the people, Thomas' priest doggedly persists in his priestly duties. Although less explicit than Herbert that Christ is the source of his priestly vocation, only through identification with a

<sup>142</sup> Compare Harris, p. 129, arguing that there is no congregation at all in the terrible sonnets.

suffering Christ does any hope of justification for the priestly ministry emerge. Otherwise, he is torn between an aloof model of the priesthood, far from Herbert's, and a pastoral model that shares much with him, except without the certainty that his ministry makes any difference to the lives of his people.

Hopkins' Catholicism differentiates him from his Anglican counterparts. Contrary to Herbert's presumption that all Christians are Aarons, Hopkins is sure that his call to be guardian of the eucharist places him at the heart of the host. Yet, initially at least, his specialised eucharistic functions do not make him aloof. Rather they give him a secure role amongst his people as their point of sacramental connection with God. This has its sacrificial cost, as 'The Deutschland' demonstrates, but it is a cost which Hopkins seems willing to pay, even where the isolation which follows from utter dedication to God becomes almost unbearable, as in the terrible sonnets.

By definition, therefore, being a priest means becoming "a man apart", consigning oneself to the margins. In worldly terms, this is to fail. Yet each of these three priest-poets makes something of a virtue from this failure, in line with the sacrificial origins of the priestly office. Although Thomas generally finds the experience of priestly service troubling, Chapter One revealed how Thomas would be decidedly uncomfortable at the centre in any case. For the centre is held by corrupt, materialist, technocrats. As some of the pastoral poems hint, Thomas finds a role in the priestly task because it is the marginal way of Christ. There is, finally and perhaps grudgingly, no other place to be for a Welsh nationalist who finds his alternative way in the eucharist. Again in line with the previous chapter, Herbert is not greatly troubled by life at the margins either, because he is convinced that God's grace reaches his followers wherever they are. As God can use everybody and anybody, social margins, as also social distinctions, are unimportant in his service and they must be sacrificed, along with everything in life, to God's service. Where he is, dispensing the wine of God's kingdom, a new centre is formed. This is, in some ways, similar to Hopkins' attitude to his priestly service. Sacrificing social position in favour of a new Catholic universe, he believes that he has found his place at the new centre defined by Christ's sacrifice. For to find the true centre of the universe is to live sacrificially, and that is what becoming a Catholic, and a priest, involves.

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<sup>143</sup> *To Bridges*, p. 250 (17 February 1887).

Problems lie ahead, because poets are unaccustomed to the obscurity which seems to attach naturally to the priesthood. On the priest's sacrificial terms, however, they will simply have to get used to it. As yet, the priest-poet's poetic vocation has remained largely undiscussed. To be sure, as this chapter shows, poetry records priestly activity. Yet there is also a sense in which poetry clears room for its own form of priestly activity. The next two chapters discuss this possibility. Chapter Three examines how the priest-poets understand their poetic vocation, while Chapter Four investigates what happens when they bring the two vocations together.

## Chapter Three: the Use of Poetry

### *The poetic tradition*

If priests find themselves on the margins of society, poets have been central to cultural consciousness throughout history. At the beginning of the modern English critical tradition, Sidney in his *Defence of Poesie* defended poets as those in the vanguard of civilisation and knowledge,<sup>1</sup> and poetry as “the first light giver to ignorance”.<sup>2</sup> Cultural memories of the poet as a divine mouthpiece linger in Sidney’s work, as he famously justifies the poet’s title of “Maker” on the grounds that the poet is able to “deliver a golden” world which improves upon the “brasen” world of Nature.<sup>3</sup> The idea of the dignity of the poetic art dominates the poetic tradition and it is against these claims for poets and poetry that Herbert, Hopkins and Thomas write. This chapter considers how their notions of religious poetry fit into that tradition.

The Judaeo-Christian tradition finds its antecedents for religious poetry largely in the prophetic writings and in the Psalms. Old Testament psalmists and prophets were consumed by the word of God and they proclaimed it in poetry. Consequently, when the poet-critics of the English language tradition have sought to defend poetry, they have readily done so by aligning it with religion and morality. In fact, however, biblical poetry’s sacredness means that it is of limited use as a justification for poetry, because the would-be religious poet runs the danger of encroaching on sacred territory. This is apparent in Sidney’s sharp distinction between the imaginative literature he wishes to defend and the separate genre of religious poems which “imitate the unconceivable excellencies of God”.<sup>4</sup> Religious poems are useful for comfort and consolation, yet they do not, as imaginative poesy does, “make to imitate, and imitate both to delight and teach”.<sup>5</sup> Although Sidney considers that post-biblical authors can imitate the psalmody of David, Moses and Deborah,<sup>6</sup> this possibility is not his concern. Imitating the inconceivable excellencies of God differs from what he considers the true poet’s duty of figuring forth “the divine consideration of what may be and should be”.<sup>7</sup> That is the poet’s task, yet Sidney still tries

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, ‘The Defence of Poesie’ in *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. by Albert Feuillerat, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), III, 3-50 (pp. 4-6).

<sup>2</sup> Sidney, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Sidney, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Sidney, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Sidney, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> After all, “Orpheus, Amphion, Homer . . . and many other” have done so (“though in a full wrong divinitie”) (p. 9). The “many other”, of course, includes Sidney and his sister, the Countess of Pembroke.

<sup>7</sup> Sidney, p. 10.

to assume the high moral ground by claiming it for godly ends. Imaginative poetry, he insists, is involved in "divine consideration",<sup>8</sup> and is an aid to moral improvement. It is the first step on the path of learning which leads "us to as high a perfection, as our degenerate soules . . . can be capable of".<sup>9</sup> This ultimate goal, Sidney argues, justifies poetry's intoxicating effects. Poets

imitate both to delight & teach, and delight to move men to take that goodnesse in hand, which without delight they would flie as from a stranger; and teach to make them know that goodnesse whereunto they are moved . . .<sup>10</sup>

In Sidney's scheme, poetry assists the religious vision of reformed lives.

This idea, rather at odds with a strict Reformed understanding of grace, flowers fully in the Romantic era. Shelley's eagerness to trumpet poets as the legislators of the world has little of Sidney's ultimate humility before the great Maker of all makers, but it remains a largely religious defence.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the willingness to elevate poets to fully vocational status, with every religious undertone, is one of the few features uniting the disparate figures of Romanticism.<sup>12</sup> The vision of prophetic bards atop wild hillocks with words and beards streaming on the wind is a stereotype, but a stereotype which the Romantics did little to dispel. Matthew Arnold modified and civilised this view of poetry for Victorian sensibilities by marrying Sidney's stress on moral seriousness with the Romantic vision of the primacy of poetry.<sup>13</sup> He was utterly explicit about his belief that poetry could assist in that "transformation of religion" which he believed necessary for humanity to attain perfection. In his quest for what Madden calls "a new religion of the imaginative reason",<sup>14</sup> Arnold argued that poetry is the means by which man "comes nearest to being able to utter the truth".<sup>15</sup> In lofty terms, he ordained poetry as a spur to moral action, the vehicle for keeping humanity awake to the grandeur of life, and the imperative ideal that

<sup>8</sup> Sidney, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Sidney, p. 11. Compare p. 12: "the ending end of all earthly learning" is "vertuous action".

<sup>10</sup> Sidney, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Thus Shelley famously speaks of the poets participating "in the eternal, the infinite, and the one", and of them being "the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration" — P.B. Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, ed. by Albert S. Cook, (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1891), pp. 6, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Prickett provides an interesting examination of the religious claims which Wordsworth, Shelley and Blake make for their role in 'Poetry and Prophecy: Bishop Lowth and the Hebrew Scriptures in Eighteenth Century England', in *Images of Belief in Literature*, ed. by David Jasper (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 81-103 (pp. 82-84).

<sup>13</sup> Not that Arnold was an uncritical admirer of English Romanticism. In his essay on Heinrich Heine in the first series of *Essays in Criticism*, he condemns English Romanticism for its intellectual insularity: "Wordsworth, Scott, and Keats . . . do not apply modern ideas to life; they constitute, therefore, *minor currents*": 'Heinrich Heine: Essays in Criticism 1865', in *Matthew Arnold: Selected Prose*, ed. by P. J. Keating (London: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 159-166 (pp. 165-166).

<sup>14</sup> William A. Madden, *Matthew Arnold: A Study of the Aesthetic Temperament in Victorian England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 187.

consoles humanity and calls it to its destiny of perfection. Faced with a decay of confidence in the historical basis of Christianity, Arnold proposed that humanity should seek its stay, and essentially its religion in poetry. Poetry for Arnold is not merely religious; it is religion:

In poetry as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find . . . as time goes on and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay.<sup>15</sup>

In this aesthetic religion, poets must "like priests . . . offer guidance and instruction" in the eternal mysteries to their dependent public.<sup>17</sup>

Arnold's vision survived into the twentieth century with exposure from I.A. Richards and his followers.<sup>18</sup> But it was attacked vigorously by the converted T.S. Eliot on the grounds that it expected "too much" from poetry. He instead approved Maritain's dictum that "religion saves poetry from the absurdity of believing itself destined to transform ethics and life: saves it from overweening arrogance".<sup>19</sup> In his religious riposte, he objected that Arnold "cared too much for civilisation, forgetting that Heaven and Earth shall pass away, and Mr. Arnold with them, and there is only one stay."<sup>20</sup> Eliot's argument is consciously reactionary, making him, like Johnson, something of a dissenter from the drift of that tradition, going back to Sidney, which elevates poetry. Poetry can not, in Eliot's mind, stand in for some misplaced term which unites morality and art. A person's theology stands or falls apart from his poetry which must be justified on its own grounds. If theology must go, poetry can not be a handmaiden to something which no longer exists. So Eliot concludes his chapter on Arnold in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* with the assertion that "A man's theory of the place of poetry is not independent of his view of life in general".<sup>21</sup> This applies equally to the priest-poets whose approaches to poetry, explored in this chapter, are bound up with their views of theology.

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<sup>15</sup> Arnold, 'Essays in Criticism, Second Series: Wordsworth', in *Selected Prose*, pp. 366-385 (p. 369).

<sup>16</sup> Arnold, 'Essays in Criticism, Second Series: The Study of Poetry', in *Selected Prose*, pp. 340-366 (p. 341).

<sup>17</sup> George Watson, *The Literary Critics: A Study of English Descriptive Criticism*, 2nd edn (London: Woburn Press, 1973), p. 138.

<sup>18</sup> See T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), pp. 124-135. In the original text of *Science and Poetry*, Richards wrote that "Poetry is capable of saving us", to which he added in subsequent editions: "of preserving us or rescuing us from confusion and frustration" (I.A. Richards, *Poetries and Sciences: A Reissue of Science and Poetry (1926, 1935) with Commentary* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> *The Use of Poetry*, pp. 148, 137.

<sup>20</sup> *The Use of Poetry*, p. 119.

<sup>21</sup> *The Use of Poetry*, p. 119.



### *Herbert — the poet's offering*

The place of George Herbert's *The Temple* within this poetic tradition is equivocal. At first glance, Herbert's lyrics lie outside Sidney's stated purview, because they are poems that "imitate the unconceivable excellencies of God", a category which Sidney regards as beyond the critical pale.<sup>22</sup> In fact, however, although Herbert shares Sidney's view of poetry's didactic purpose, his didacticism is differently conceived. His poetry does not project some ideal relationship between himself and God, but remains immersed in the brazen difficulties of faith. It therefore escapes Sidney's reasons for not considering religious poetry. Similarly, while Sidney seems to consider the writing of religious poetry an uncritical exercise, the many poems in *The Temple* concerned with poetic theory show that Herbert subjected the religious poetic enterprise to intense critical scrutiny.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Herbert does not take his poetic theory unsullied from Sidney. At times, admittedly, as in the didactic 'Perirrhaneium', he echoes Sidney's assertion that poetry's prime functions are to edify and educate, "to teach and delight".<sup>23</sup> With the voice of a self-deprecating Polonius, Herbert's moralist in 'Perirrhaneium' enjoins his readers to "Hearken unto a Verser, who may chance/Ryme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure". For

A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies,<sup>24</sup>  
And turn delight into a sacrifice. (3-6)

This is the stuff of good Renaissance humanism, and 'Perirrhaneium' is usually seen, albeit uneasily, as the didactic moral preparation for entry into 'The Church'.<sup>25</sup> Yet as Strier observes, the values espoused in 'Perirrhaneium' are often entirely at odds with the gospel message.<sup>26</sup> The difficulties in dating individual Herbert poems notwithstanding, Strier argues that 'Perirrhaneium' is an early poem promoting the self-reliant attitude of an aspiring courtier. It is certainly at odds with Herbert's later insistence on God-reliance, gained through "a thorough apprehension" of Reformation theology which was targeted

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<sup>22</sup> Sidney, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Sidney, p. 9. Sidney was himself derivative in the view that poetry should inculcate morality — See Watson, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> There may even be a recollection of Sidney's assertion, quoted above, that poetry encourages men "to take that goodnesse in hand, which without delight they would *like* as from a stranger".

<sup>25</sup> Mostly uneasily — e.g. Joseph Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), p. 103, Singleton, p. 144.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Strier, *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 93ff: "Herbert's poem is no more concerned with service of a prince than service of God . . . its focus is purely social" (94); "Self-interest is the only motive to which "The Church-Porch" appeals" (99); "religion in "The Church-Porch" is a matter of straightforward spiritual commercialism" (100).

against the attitudes of self-seeking courtiership.<sup>27</sup> Inside 'The Church', as 'Trinitie Sunday' suggests, good deeds ("faith . . . hope [and] charitie") follow redemption and sanctification. They are not produced by poetry. There is thus a significant gulf between the poetry of 'The Church' and Sidney's view of poetry as a moral instrument. Indeed, as Kyne observes, Herbert (and Hopkins) "impugn the elevation of the self and the reliability of the poet's voice in depicting the meaning of life".<sup>28</sup> To join poetry and morality in the way that Sidney does runs counter to the entire drift of Reformation thought on human depravity. Counteracting depravity, 'The Church' insists, is God's work.

That Herbert held this view does not, however, cause him to abandon poetry. Indeed, his entire output, from the stylish, if rather self-important<sup>29</sup> sonnets to his mother, through to the reflections on ageing in 'The Forerunners', debate the propriety of writing religious verse. The first surviving sonnet composed by the young Herbert<sup>30</sup> concludes defiantly that God is a fit subject for poetry. It begins rather defensively in this assertion before swinging onto the attack against the luxurious self-absorption of contemporary love poetry. The second youthful sonnet again sets the materiality of love against the eternity of God with even fewer traces of defensiveness. Poetic praise of any mortal is ultimately pointless for all mortals are destined tombwards. Praise of God, on the other hand, is endless:

Open the bones, and you shall nothing find  
In the best *face* but *filth*, when, Lord, in thee  
The *beauty* lies in the *discovery*. (12-14)

This is more than an argument for the legitimacy of sacred poetry. It is a bid for its superiority. Divine poetry opens a field of exploration far richer and more fulfilling than that available to the love poet. This is suggested by the use of the word "*discovery*" which Hutchinson glosses as "uncovering, disclosing", and Tobin as "revelation, exploration, investigation, opening".<sup>31</sup> God presents all that the poet needs for the fulfillment of poetic subject matter; ineffable beauty and endless exploration. It is as if young Herbert has taken

<sup>27</sup> Strier (1995), p. 108.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Theresa Kyne, S.C., *Country Parsons, Country Poets: George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins as Spiritual Autobiographers* (Greensburg PA: Eadmer, 1992), p. 35.

<sup>29</sup> Tuve finds them so self-important as to suggest that they should be titled, 'Of Myself! — Rosemond Tuve, *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 192. This accords with Strier's view that the young Herbert's courtly attitudes appear self and not God-centred.

<sup>30</sup> Walton, p. 275 says they were written for Herbert's mother when Herbert was "in his seventeenth year", which would date them 1609-1610.

<sup>31</sup> Hutchinson, p. 550; Tobin, p. 423.

up the challenge proposed by Sidney<sup>32</sup> in the *Defence of Poesie* to utilise the genre of "Songs and Sonets"

... in singing the praises of the immortal beutie, the immortall goodnes of that God, who giveth us hands to write, and wits to conceive: of which we might wel want words, but never matter, of which we could turne our eyes to nothing, but we should ever have new budding occasions.<sup>33</sup>

Even as Sidney demurs at his own challenge, Herbert in *The Temple* faces it fearlessly. Indeed, one of the key examinations of poetic theory in "The Church" is a deliberate corrective of Sidney's approach to poetry. 'Jordan' (2) is in part a parody of the opening sonnet in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* sequence.<sup>34</sup> Sidney's sonnet concerns a failed quest for poetic tools with which to attract the pity and affection of his love. Hitherto, owing to a lack of invention and a slavish imitation of other poets, his attempts have floundered. The only way to escape this bind, the sonnet concludes, is to follow the Muse's recommendation of emotional honesty and poetic simplicity:

Thus great with child to speake, and helpless in my throwes,  
Biting my trewand pen, beating myself for spite,  
'Foole', said my Muse to me, 'looke in thy heart and write'. (12-14)

The direct style advocated here is the style of much of *The Temple*,<sup>35</sup> yet there is an important difference. Herbert's speaker in 'Jordan' (2) has already mastered the invention which Sidney's speaker claims to crave. The "weaving and winding" of the youthful sonnets proves as much.<sup>36</sup> Where Sidney disingenuously disclaims any ability to write elegantly, Herbert's speaker has that ability, and claims to have rejected it because it creates a tone unsuitable for religious poetry. For, by weaving himself "into the sense" of his poems, he has substituted pride for humility and poetic works for simple faith, so betraying his own subject matter. Thus the final words of 'Jordan' (2) belong to the speaker's "friend", who, hearing the speaker's bustle, whispers to him:

... How wide is all this long pretence!  
There is in love a sweetness readie penn'd:  
Copie out onely that, and save expense. (15-18)

This conclusion follows the advice of the friend to write simply, abandoning the weaving and winding metaphors which his manifest skill equips him to write.

<sup>32</sup> Or, as Martz observes, Southwell's challenge to "wooe some skilfuller pennes from unworthy labours", his laying forth of "a few course threds together, to invite some skilfuller wits to goe forward in the same, or to begin some finer peece: wherein it may be secne how well, verse and vertue sute together." (Preface to *Saint Peters Complaint* quoted in Martz, pp. 184-185, 179.

<sup>33</sup> Sidney, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> For the extent of Sidney's influence on Herbert, see Martz, Ch. 7, esp. pp. 261-282: "the course of Herbert's development seems to move away from Donne toward that greater simplicity of Sidney and song, which accorded with Herbert's spiritual center" (p. 273).

<sup>35</sup> Martz's key point: p. 273.

<sup>36</sup> Martz, p. 263, echoing 'Jordan' (2), lines 13-14.

If Herbert follows Sidney in this, the sources of their writings remain very different. Sidney's Muse instructs him to write from his heart, but Herbert's friend tells Herbert to write from the sweetness that comes out of love. Given that Herbert's "friend" is usually the alter ego of his Lord and master, Love in this poem easily bears capitalisation. Herbert's verse, so he would have the reader believe, is drawn out and encouraged by the Lord of Love.<sup>37</sup> Herbert's poetry is therefore imitative ("*Copie* out onely that . . ."), but it is not automatic. The poet can choose whether to copy humbly or create ingeniously, but the best way to write religious poetry, he concludes, is through the restrained imitation counselled by the friend in 'Jordan' (2). Through its "plainness", such poetry avoids dramatic self-exhibition and "recovers wholeness out of the fragments of stylistic excess and poetic pride".<sup>38</sup> In this, the speaker's earlier assumption that nothing could be "too rich to clothe the sunne" (11) may be correct, but the Son is not overly concerned with fine array as such poems as 'Redemption' and 'The Bag' show. He has given up "his majestic robes of glory",<sup>39</sup> to be found among the "ragged noise and mirth/Of theeves and murderers".<sup>40</sup> Those who would imitate him, Herbert suggests, must similarly abandon elaborate raiment.

This is difficult to comprehend, partly because Herbert's sensibilities differ so much from contemporary sensibilities and partly because it is difficult to tell how much Herbert is simply being artful. Some critics, loth to allow at face value the statements in the 'Jordan' poems, attempt to reserve some dignity for poetry in the face of this apparent religious onslaught. Hence Martz argues that Herbert in 'Jordan' (1) is "only denying the necessity — not the possibility — of using such elaborate "artificial" modes of poetry as Spenserian allegory, the pastoral convention, or the ways of riddling wit".<sup>41</sup> Tuve argues, equally sincerely, that 'Jordan' (1) is "not a protest against love poetry but against its usurpation of the whole field", and she reacts fiercely to those who would make Herbert into an ascetic and his poems into "a protest against love poems".<sup>42</sup> Yet, these attitudes reveal as much about critical values as they do about Herbert. Tuve surely goes too far in claiming that Herbert "thought of poetry as both the means and the fruit" of "union with Christ as

<sup>37</sup> 'Love' (1) and (2) strengthen the suggestion that divine Love encourages Herbert's verse.

<sup>38</sup> Singleton, p. 107. As Singleton says elsewhere: "It is the plainness and brevity of the statement [in 'Jordan' (1)] which give it such power to outweigh the elaborate imagery of the preceding lines" (p. 105).

<sup>39</sup> 'The Bag', line 10.

<sup>40</sup> 'Redemption', lines 12-13.

<sup>41</sup> Martz, p. 260. Martz goes on to admit that 'Jordan' (2) represents Herbert's stylistic movement "from elaboration to restraint" (p. 261).

<sup>42</sup> Tuve, pp. 187, 185.

Heavenly Love incarnate".<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, Christ, not poetry, is always pre-eminent for him. Tuve is right to protest that Herbert is no ascetic, yet poetry still does not have the intrinsic value for him which it has for her. It can hinder religious responses as much as prompt them.<sup>44</sup> It is alarming for critics to be told that poetry has little value in and of itself, yet coming from Herbert, this should not be surprising. Chapter One and such poems as 'The Elixir' and 'Providence' indicate that nothing in Herbert's Renaissance universe exists for itself. Rather, as Summers writes, "within his poems Herbert attempted to move all souls to join in the praise of God".<sup>45</sup> Poetry is only a means to this end. Vendler does a little of her own critical squirming as she notes rightly that:

... it is not so much a mistrust of embellishments alone as a serious effort to determine for himself the locus of poetry that lies behind statements like those found in these poems. A conviction of "care in heaven" was for Herbert the precondition for the writing of poetry. He is no more eccentric in wanting the permanence of that precondition than Wordsworth in asking Nature to "forebode not any severing of our loves." The severing of loves is far more serious, even to a poet, than the impermanence of language.<sup>46</sup>

This is the constant record of Herbert's poetry. Poetry is a beautiful and wonderful thing. Tuve is right that it *can* be the vehicle which transports the poet into the presence of God; as the speaker says in 'The Quidditie',<sup>47</sup> "that which while I use/I am with thee" (11-12). Yet for Herbert, it remains a vehicle, subordinate to the greater end of his encounters with God. Constantly, his poetry implies that it is not an end in itself. It flows from Love and aims to increase love, but if it threatens to effect a severance with Love, it will be sacrificed without hesitation. Thus Nuttall considers that Herbert truly "does mean" the rejection of poetry which the 'Jordan' poems counsel.<sup>48</sup> This is a painful business but it is part of the sacrifice which the priest knows to comprise Christian commitment.

Herbert's poetic theory thus involves the conversion, rededication and, if necessary, the sacrifice of poetry to Love. These issues preoccupy the 'Jordan' poems which, as the analogue of the Jordan River suggests, are concerned with cleansing, purification and new beginnings.<sup>49</sup> They thus share the motif of exploration present in Herbert's second sonnet to his mother. When the Israelites cross the Jordan in Joshua 4, the land and the choice of

<sup>43</sup> Tuve, p. 197.

<sup>44</sup> As acknowledged in, for example, 'Jordan' (2), line 14.

<sup>45</sup> Summers, p. 108.

<sup>46</sup> Vendler, p. 268.

<sup>47</sup> The title of this poem in the Williams manuscript is 'Poetry'. See *The Williams Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems*, ed. by Amy M. Charles (Delmar: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977), p. xxxiii.

<sup>48</sup> "He does mean it and he is riven": A.D. Nuttall, *Overheard by God* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> The Anglican baptismal liturgy links baptism with Israel's crossing of the Red Sea and Christ's baptism in the Jordan — see 'The Ministration of Baptism to be Used in the Church' in *Liturgical Services of the Reign of*

how to use it lies all before them (Deuteronomy 11.25-32 etc.). The 'Jordan' poems continue that theme: when Herbert crosses his Helicon, the land of spiritual poetry lies ahead for exploration. Where Sidney considers religious poetry beyond criticism (and therefore has little to say about it) Herbert questions its possible uses continually. Ultimately, because his poetry reflects on his faith experiences, it comes to form part of the sacrifice of himself to God which is his sacrifice of praise. In that light, the sacrificial overtones of the 'Jordan' titles are significant. As the Israelites sacrificed on an altar built without tools after they crossed the Jordan, so Herbert, Daalder observes, "is building an altar for God, as a religious poet" without the tools of the love poets,<sup>50</sup> but out of his own experiences. Here, the purged hymns to Love promised in 'Love' (2) replace quaint words and trim invention. This is the manifesto of Herbert's sacrificial Christian poetics.

Herbert's doctrine of vocation, the last chapter showed, requires complete submission to God, and in keeping with this doctrine, this new poetics places as much store on life as on art. 'Easter' requires that "heart and lute" consort together in a song of praise (13). It is God's "favour" which gives "savour" to the deliberately simplistic "poore oblation" of 'An Offering' (37-39). Likewise, 'A True Hymne' asserts that the few words "My joy, my life, my crown" are "Among the best in art" if they are "*truly* said" (5-8). For,

The finenesse which a hymne or psalme affords,  
Is, when the soul unto the lines accords. (9-10)

Most of Herbert's religious lyrics, however, are neither hymns nor psalms. If devotion is to be the literary litmus test, many of his individual poems would seem to fail or fall outside it. In fact, however, 'A True Hymne' appears to draw no distinction between lyric poetry and hymnody, for it immediately applies its principles to verse. Thus, it matters not if "the verse be somewhat scant", for provided "th' heart be moved", "God doth supplie the want" (16-18). Herbert then demonstrates this divine supplementation in action by providing a poetically redeeming feature in an otherwise rather dull poem:

As when th' heart sayes (sighing to be approved)  
O, *could I love!* and stops: God writeth, *I loved.* (19-20)

Yet this witty reversal, so typical of Herbert, appears to counteract his earlier point. Certainly, from a post-Enlightenment viewpoint, answering the speaker's dilemma with the

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*Queen Elizabeth*, p. 200. See also Tuve's excellent discussion of the implications of the 'Jordan' titles and their relationship to such poems as 'The Altar', 'Love' (1) and (2) (pp. 182ff).

<sup>50</sup> Joost Daalder, 'Herbert's "Poetic Theory"', *George Herbert Journal*, 9 (1985), 17-34 (p. 24). Daalder denies the existence of a single "poetic theory" in Herbert, suggesting that Herbert's theory varies from poem to poem. While agreeing that different attitudes to poetry are evident across *The Temple*, I would argue that Herbert maintains a relatively consistent theological attitude of sacrifice.

voice of God is no more than high poetic artistry, a device completely removed from the simplicity he has just been advocating.<sup>51</sup> But Herbert would no doubt respond by extrapolating the principles of 'The Elixir' to argue that his duty to God requires him to write as well as he can, to give the thing its "perfection" (8). It is then simply fortunate for the reader that Herbert was a fine poet. God makes up defects in devotion in accordance with the speaker's emotional desire (as poems like 'Aaron', 'The Priesthood' and 'Assurance' (25) demonstrate) and Herbert's skill in writing is simply an expression of that desire to submit in worship to Christ. When writing gives up "its claim to be original" (in the Sidneyan mode) and accepts "its identity as *copy*" under Christ,<sup>52</sup> it unites divine motivation and the sacrifice of human ability in the praise of God.

'Love' (2) further these principles by returning to the imagery of sacrifice, insisting that human creators should lay all their invention on God's altar for purgation, because the fire of wit is God's fire. In practice, this means sending wit back "in hymnes" to God again (8), for wit remains, in some feudal sense, still God's. The speaker concludes with a vision of how things ought to be when God completes the repossession<sup>53</sup> of his bankrupted creation:

Thou shalt recover all thy goods in kinde,  
Who wert disscized by usurping lust:  
All knees shall bow to thee; all wits shall rise,  
And praise him who did make and mend our eies. (11-14)

The biblical echoes here<sup>54</sup> and the fire imagery which pervades the earlier part of this sonnet confirm that the vision of redeemed wit is eschatological. Yet, though a future vision, it is also a present reality, and *The Temple* is an exercise in showing that poetry *can* praise God now without compromising its artistic integrity. In the redeemed future it will do so inevitably.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Unless of course God has supplied the want. As Clarke observes, the question remains whether "the poem itself [is] 'A True Hymne' or . . . merely about a true hymn" (Clarke, p. 52). Clarke tends towards the latter, as there "is no indication", she says, that the final "Loved" "really is God's contribution" (p. 97).

<sup>52</sup> "When writing gives up its claim as original . . . and accepts its identity as *copy* . . . it defines itself as 'A true Hymne' where Christ completes the poet's act" — Heather A.R. Asals, *Equivocal Predication: George Herbert's Way to God* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1981), p. 24.

<sup>53</sup> Imagery of possession is also used in 'Redemption' (where the incarnation is seen in terms of repossession), 'Dialogue' (where individual salvation is viewed in these terms), and 'Obedience' (which stresses, ultimately, Jesus' purchase of the speaker's soul).

<sup>54</sup> "That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2.10-11 in a vision which is present and future).

<sup>55</sup> The reference to him who mends our eyes also evokes the future by reason of its common ground with 'Dooms-day', where the decomposed dust of the dead stirs and rubs its eyes ahead of the judgement. Herbert's approach to poetry is largely a question of frames of reference. Only with eyes mended by God does he see poetry as he does.

Herbert's formula — that the addition of heart and will to poetic craft satisfies both religious devotion and aesthetics — will not convince the sceptic, for it is ultimately a question of alternative frames of reference.<sup>56</sup> This much is evident from 'The Forerunners', which asserts the essential neutrality of poetic devices and focuses on the use to which they are put. In a voice of calm and measured lament, the speaker regrets the fact that the harbingers of old age have come to "dispark" him of his "sparkling notions", his "sweet phrases" and "lovely metaphors" (1-4). For although the speaker found such devices at the doors of "stews and brothels" (15), they are not intrinsically corrupt. He has employed them as offerings to God, bringing them "to Church well drest and clad" (17). They can work in more than one way and if they are now enticed away by foolish lovers, it is to their own cost. If beauteous words abandon the beatific presence, the beatific presence remains unaffected for it is immutable beauty:

True beautie dwells on high: ours is a flame  
But borrow'd thence to light us thither (28-29)

Redeemed, poetry can lead humanity to the true beauty on high and that is the true destiny of poetic language: "Beautie and beauteous words should go together" (30). Yet, if language abandons this destiny, Herbert's speaker claims not to mind:

... I passe not; take your way:  
For, *Thou art still my God*, is all that ye  
Perhaps with more embellishment can say, (31-33)

Martz places great store on the word "Perhaps" in line 33: "The poet loves his art: the devout humanist cannot bring himself to renounce it utterly, though he continues to contemplate this possibility, in "The Posie".<sup>57</sup> It can be added, further, that he contemplates this possibility in 'The Pearl', both 'Jordan' poems and 'A True Hymne'. For Herbert's approach to poetry is *continually* sacrificial,<sup>58</sup> as these poems show and as is exemplified in his own treatment of *The Temple* manuscript. The poetry itself was not his final interest and at every turn, he was prepared to sacrifice it. Rather than expressing only a wistful glance back at the poetic plough in God's despite, the "perhaps" of 'The Forerunners' represents the musing conclusion of a man who was fully prepared to count the cost, who had already abandoned courtly life's comforts and connections in order to become an obscure country parson. Further quiet and understated sacrifices of the self and its poetry are entirely in keeping with this resolve. Like all things in the world, poetry can

<sup>56</sup> Summers, p. 110 comments that those who misconstrue Herbert's view of poetry do so because of "the differing evaluations which Herbert and most moderns give to the 'self'."

<sup>57</sup> Martz, p. 314.



work for God's praise (it is part of "mans whole estate" which, when properly realised, serves God — 'Mattens' (13-14)) but not where selfish selfhood works into the sense of the poetry.

This proper realisation is anticipated in the final lines of 'The Forerunners'. "Go birds of spring", announces the speaker,

... let winter have his fee,  
Let a bleak paleness chalk the doore,  
So all within be livelier then before. (34-36)

The harbingers of death *are* chalking the exit door of the speaker's heart and brain. His time is nearly up, so that the sacrifice is unavoidable.<sup>59</sup> In the final, deathly confrontation to come, poetry is not uppermost in his mind.

Given Herbert's readiness to sacrifice his own poetry to God's ends, it is no surprise that he considers God's writing more important than his own. On one level, this means the Bible, the book of "infinite sweetness" and "a masse<sup>60</sup>/Of strange delights" ('The Holy Scriptures' (1) (1, 6-7)). Yet God's writing is also a metaphor which Herbert uses to describe God's activity in the world and in the believer's heart. Echoing such biblical references as 2 Corinthians 3.3,<sup>61</sup> the speaker of 'Nature' pleads that God engrave the divine "rev'rend law and fear" in his heart (14), just as the speaker of 'Good Friday' asks that Christ's sorrows be written in his heart (23). Indeed, in 'A True Hymne', God responds to these requests by writing "*Loved*" in the hearts of his followers.

This stress on writing is logical in a faith centred on the Logos of God. 'The Flower' confirms in passing the supreme importance of God's writing, whether in the heart of the believer, in the fabric of the world, or as seen in the Logos:

We say amisse,  
This or that is:  
Thy word is all, if we could spell. (19-21)

Everything is evidence of God's word in the world, and everything, poetry included, should resound to praise Him. That, not the moral reformation of his readers through poetry, is

<sup>58</sup> Compare Strier (1983), pp. 214-216, where he disagrees with Martz on the "Perhaps" of 'The Forerunners'. Compare also his commentary on the "perhaps" in 'Submission': "I would read [it] . . . as devastatingly ironic and self-mocking, as extreme understatement" (Strier (1995), p. 114).

<sup>59</sup> Shaw, p. 105, notes that the harbingers have already come.

<sup>60</sup> Although it seems unlikely, this may be a Protestant pun on "mass", privileging the Scriptures over the sacrifice of the mass.

<sup>61</sup> "you are the a letter of Christ . . . written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (NRSV).

Herbert's aim. Poetry may have a part in that reformation, but only insofar as it leads to God, for Herbert's conviction of God's final importance colours his poetry as it marks his life. Summers makes this point in connection with the all embracing vision of "The Forerunners":

In the poem, as in Herbert's career, is the implication that the beauty of language, like the soul's, can live only if it is 'lost' to the proper object; that the craftsman maintains his mastery of beauty only upon the condition of his willingness to surrender it.<sup>62</sup>

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it can not come forth to bear much fruit. There is no doubt that Herbert as an artist took delight in the intrigues of language and the delights of poetry. Yet he knew also the cost which serving Christ required of him, in life and in poetry. Ultimately, the sacrificial principles at work in both are interchangeable. Viewed thus, Herbert's failure to publish English poetry in his lifetime makes sense. He desired the publication of *The Temple* only if it would, so Walton reports, "turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul".<sup>63</sup> Fame (the natural air for poetry) gives way to obscurity as embellished adornment bows before plain style. Herbert's justification for art comes, not from within the art, but from without.<sup>64</sup> "The Altar", which makes no distinction between art and life, talks of each part of the poet's "hard heart" meeting in the "frame" of his poetry, with the common aim of praising God (10-12). Similarly, "The Dedication" matches beginning and end, art and life, to suggest that the poet must harmonise with the inspiring divine breath in singing the praise of God's name:

*Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee;  
Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came,  
And must return. Accept of them and me,  
And make us strive, who shall sing best thy name.* (1-4)

The previous chapter showed that Herbert's conception of vocation involved the complete sacrifice of himself. The attendant sacrifice of art simply extends the sacrificial principle which lies at the core of his faith. This is some way from the view of the poet as an exalted agent in the process of moral reform. Yet Herbert insists that godly living as poet or priest requires a costly sacrifice conducted in a spirit of praise and thanksgiving. When he passed

<sup>62</sup> Summers, p. 119. Compare Vendler, p. 267: "*The Forerunners* is . . . fully in command of its own adoration of language and its distrust of it".

<sup>63</sup> Herbert's message to Ferrar recorded in Izaak Walton, p. 311. There is no way of proving how far Walton has embroidered this account, but it seems entirely consistent with Nicholas Ferrar's record of Herbert's opinion of his work in rebuilding the parish church at Leighton Bromswold: "*It is a good work, if it be sprinkled with the blood of Christ.*" ("The Printers to the Reader", in Hutchinson, p. 4.)

<sup>64</sup> Clarke, pp. 276-280.

on the manuscript to Nicholas Ferrar, he could not know how his sacrifice would turn out. As the record of centuries of readers shows,<sup>65</sup> it has borne fruit a hundredfold.

### *Hopkins — the poetry of inscape*

Hopkins' poetic debt to Herbert is often remarked,<sup>66</sup> but although he "esteemed the sincere faith apparent in Herbert's verse", neither Herbert's style nor his attitude much influences Hopkins' "mature phase".<sup>67</sup> In part, this is attributable to the difference between Hopkins' sacramental theology and Herbert's word-based, Reformed theology. Herbert's focus on preaching and teaching leads to poetry which involves what Roston calls "a didactic elucidation of divine hieroglyphics concealed within the natural world",<sup>68</sup> in dishes, windows, flowers, beasts etc. Two hundred years later, however, Hopkins lives under the shadow of the Romantics who, as agents of divine inspiration, sought in their poetry to transmit "a sense of pantheistic immanence",<sup>69</sup> rather than to interpret the divine lessons found in the world around them. Their shadow obscures Herbert's poetic stance of humble copying and sacrificial instruction. Though Hopkins tries to follow Herbert's lead, he can not do so. But as a poet, he must write, even if he is eventually unsure how to reconcile the results with his narrow vision of poetry in service of the priesthood.

Indeed, had it not been for his conversion, it is easy to imagine Hopkins descending permanently into a wistful Victorian poetry laced with Arnold-derived yearning and Ruskin-inspired effeteness. Much of Hopkins' early poetry mirrors Ruskin's "elaborate word pictures charged with emotion".<sup>70</sup> 'Il Mystico', for example, denounces "fever'd fumes and slime and cakèd clot" (8), in favour of "breezy belts of upper air/Melting into aether rare" (73-74). The morosity that lies at the heart of pure aestheticism can be glimpsed in the intensely beautiful but also languid and world-weary 'Heaven-Haven'. It is easy to forget that this is the work of a man only twenty years old. At Oxford, Hopkins' aesthetic tendencies had their best possible coach in Walter Pater. Yet, likely though it might have seemed in 1864, these influences did not lead Hopkins to write *The Testament of Beauty*. Instead, as Chapter One suggested, his conversion moved him away from a

<sup>65</sup> e.g. see those collected by Stanley Fish, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 49-51; Clarke, pp. 7-9.

<sup>66</sup> e.g. by W.H. Gardner in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition*, 2 vols (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1948), I, pp. 170-172.

<sup>67</sup> Murray Roston, *Victorian Contexts: Literature and the Visual Arts* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 156.

<sup>68</sup> Roston, p. 156.

<sup>69</sup> Roston, p. 156.

<sup>70</sup> *Victorians on Literature and Art*, ed. by Robert L. Peters (London: Peter Owen, 1961), pp. 2-3.

concern with beauty for its own sake towards the conviction that beauty proclaims Christ. For Hopkins, this change is foundational. It is no merely theoretical shift, which allows Hopkins the poet to justify an otherwise unjustifiable obsession with beauty by dragging in "the name of Christ simply to mollify the conscience of the priest".<sup>71</sup> Rather, it is an escape from the solipsism which values objects purely for the aesthetic experience they give to the beholder. The danger of such aestheticism is that the objects come to have no intrinsic value at all, becoming instead part of the beholder's process of self-consumption. Perhaps Hopkins sees something of his own tendency in this direction when describing the sin of Lucifer as an exclusive "instressing of his own inscape".<sup>72</sup> By adopting a combination of Ignatian and Scotist thought, however, Hopkins avoided this constant tail-chasing and escaped the self-referential epistemological prison. Viewed through Scotist-Ignatian lenses, the natural world did not simply reflect back Hopkins' self, but instead allowed him to see Christ playing "in ten thousand places". Poetry for him is thus a celebration of that play which echoes, recreates and reciprocates Christ's greater play. "The fundamental tenet of his literary views and more particularly of his poetic theories", as Peters says, "is that 'inscape is the aim of poetry'".<sup>73</sup> As Christ is known in the inscape of his creatures, poetry aims at an evocation of Christ.

Thus Hopkins' nature poetry primarily aims to achieve Christly inscape. The influence of his age never disappears completely,<sup>74</sup> but Arnold, Ruskin and Pater are less important for his mature poetry than Scotist theology and Ignatian discipline. Scotus' influence on Hopkins is often remarked, but Ignatian influence is equally important. The tripartite form of Ignatian meditation shapes Hopkins' poetry structurally, for example,<sup>75</sup> and Pick insists further that the ethos of the *Spiritual Exercises* had an incalculable impact on Hopkins' art.<sup>76</sup> According to the 'Principle and Foundation' which introduces the *Spiritual Exercises*,

<sup>71</sup> W.H. Gardner, I, p. 19.

<sup>72</sup> *Sermons*, pp. 179-180, 200-201, where Hopkins describes the fall of Lucifer in terms of music. His fall involved "a dwelling on his own beauty, an instressing of his own inscape, and like a performance on the organ and instrument of his own being; it was a sounding of his own trumpet and a hymn in his own praise" (200-201). Devlin summarises this as "an excessive dwelling on his own likeness to God" (115).

<sup>73</sup> W.A.M. Peters, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Critical Essay Towards the Understanding of his Poetry*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), p. 31.

<sup>74</sup> Gardner suggests various points at which Hopkins remained affected "by the aesthetic creed" — vol 2, pp. 11, 32, 36.

<sup>75</sup> Thus Martz, pp. 325-326 suggests that much of Hopkins' poetry fits into the Ignatian scheme by first composing the place or proposing the subject, secondly by analysis and finally by way of colloquy. Compare Margaret R. Ellsberg, *Created to Praise: the Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 105; Paul L. Mariani, *A Commentary on the Complete Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. xxii-xxiii.

<sup>76</sup> Pick, pp. 27-30: "The story of Gerard Manley Hopkins from 1868 . . . till 1889 . . . is largely the story of the pervasive influence of the *Spiritual Exercises* upon him" (p. 30).

humanity was created to "praise, do reverence to and serve God our Lord", while the rest of creation exists in order to aid humanity "in the following out of" that end.<sup>77</sup> This affirmation that the created world is good, so Pick argues, motivates Hopkins' Jesuit poetry, poetry which exhibits "the fullness of the praise, reverence, and service of God which had become his way of life".<sup>78</sup> It banishes any lingering Platonic suspicions of this world and affirms that everything, poetry included,<sup>79</sup> exists for the praise of God.

That, in any case, is the theory, and it is remarkably similar to Herbert's (if slightly less anthropocentric). Yet this theological attitude to the created world does not, apparently, justify the creation of poetry for him in the way it does for Herbert. Where Herbert readily approves everything which glorifies God or does God's work, Hopkins seems sure that his priestly service can achieve those ends better than poetry. As Hopkins' endless discussion of it in his correspondence makes clear, it is not that poetry is itself illegitimate. Yet he fears that it is illegitimate *for him*. Thus, where Herbert continually debates with himself the role of poetry, Hopkins' cupboard is almost bare of *poems* on poetry. The only Hopkins poem concerned primarily with the creation of poetry is his sonnet to Bridges, "The fine delight which fathers thought". There is nothing to match the theological disputation of 'Jordan' or 'The Forerunners'. Perhaps this scarcity reflects guilt at writing poetry at all. Indeed, it takes a rare, Herbert-like genius to convert verse about poetry into verse which praises God, Hopkins' criterion for poetic composition. Without any conviction that his poetry is divinely inspired, in an era where poetry is often viewed as an end in itself, Hopkins possibly regarded poetry about poetry as an additional solipsistic occupation that led the way of Lucifer.<sup>80</sup>

Thus although the *Spiritual Exercises* were formative in shaping Hopkins' imagination they did not apparently change his attitude to the creation of poetry. The *Exercises* aim to provide a regime "for regulating one's life without being swayed by any inordinate attachment", and Hopkins appears to have considered poetry one such "inordinate attachment" even though it is not necessary to do so. "An inordinate attachment", comments Hopkins' Jesuit contemporary, Joseph Rickaby, "is an habitual set of the will

<sup>77</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola: Spanish and English with a Continuous Commentary*, ed. by Joseph Rickaby SJ (London: Burns & Oates, 1915), p. 18.

<sup>78</sup> Pick, p. 41.

<sup>79</sup> "To lift up the hands in prayer gives God glory, but a man with a dungfork in his hand, a woman with a sloppail, give him glory too" (*Sermons*, p. 241).

<sup>80</sup> Compare Miller, p. 338: "Artistic selving is bad because it is devilish". Miller, in my opinion, draws his net too widely in applying this suspicion to all poetry (pp. 337-339).

apart from God and salvation: the man who has it, wants God and salvation, possibly, but he also wants something else that has no bearing on either".<sup>81</sup> Hopkins feared that composing poetry was for him just such an habitual set of the will, if the poetry did not fit within his strict notions of what contributed to God's praise. He did not, apparently, extend these reservations to others, encouraging Patmore and Bridges' writing as a great act of Empire; an act, almost, for furthering the kingdom of God.<sup>82</sup> He told them also that fame is necessary for a poet,<sup>83</sup> and he would not have corrupted them in a path he considered inherently wrong.

But he avoided that fame himself. For poetry can be dangerous for the individual. Thus, where Ignatius comments that the enemy can attack by putting before us "sensual delights and pleasures", Rickaby notes that "licentious poetry" is one such "sensual pleasure", as is all "art employed to gild sin".<sup>84</sup> Such poetry is obviously illegitimate for the Jesuit, and it is difficult to imagine Hopkins engaging in it. Yet this faintly ludicrous prospect stresses that the source of Hopkins' misgivings was moral rather than artistic. Rickaby notes that the priest must give up "things lawful in themselves" for the sake of his calling,<sup>85</sup> even if, as Pick argues, this is but

a preliminary and negative aspect of a very positive thing, a giving of due order to all things in terms of their respective degrees of goodness, truth and beauty.<sup>86</sup>

For the Jesuit, poetry must pass the sacrificial test which applies to all of life: does it lead him towards or away from God? Like Herbert, Hopkins knew the need to sacrifice anything which failed this test, yet because his definition of that was apparently narrower than Herbert's, his sacrifice had a higher price.

Again, however, as in Herbert's 'The Forerunners', the conviction that art is morally neutral underlies those few Hopkins poems which consider the arts. The most direct statement of this occurs in the obscure, rough-hewn, 'How All is One Way Wrought'. Though Bridges considered it to be about music, and Mariani about architecture,<sup>87</sup> its argument is equally applicable to poetry. That argument is that the work of "masterhood" under

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<sup>81</sup> Rickaby, p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> *To Bridges*, p. 231 (13 October 1886): "A great work by an Englishman is like a great battle won by England"; *Further Letters*, pp. 366ff (to Coventry Patmore, 4 June 1886): "Your poems are a good deed done for the Catholic Church and another for England, for the British Empire . . ."

<sup>83</sup> *To Dixon*, pp. 6-7 (13 June 1878).

<sup>84</sup> Rickaby, pp. 67, 74.

<sup>85</sup> Rickaby, p. 82.

<sup>86</sup> Pick, p. 37.

<sup>87</sup> Mariani, p. 159.

consideration, the “piece of perfect song” is a “fault-not-found-with good” which is “neither right nor wrong” (21-24).<sup>88</sup> To call something a “fault-not-found-with good” is high praise, reminiscent of God’s assessment of his original creation in Genesis 1. Like Sidney before him, Hopkins deems human creation capable of artistic perfection. And the skill of the poet reflects the skill of the great Maker. For the artist’s art makes known “the music of his mind,” (10), which is but an expression of his inescape, of what he was created to be:

Not free in this because  
His powers seemed free to play:  
He swept what scope he was  
To sweep and must obey. (13-16)

The Great Maker is not named here, but these lines reflect Hopkins’ belief that God guarantees individuation so that art can not avoid expressing the “thisness” of its creator’s mind. “Everything”, writes Peters of the philosophy underlying ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’, “expresses in its connatural activity its own individuality”. Above all, this “is verified in the poet whose peculiar activity concerns the very explicit expression of his own self. Of poetry is it most true: ‘*myself* it speaks and spells”’.<sup>89</sup> This, in fact, is Hopkins’ touchstone for art. He admires Purcell’s music because it rehearses Purcell’s own “abrupt self” (‘Henry Purcell’ (7-8)). Thus Hopkins aims in poetry to radiate a comparable expression of unique selfhood.<sup>90</sup> Where poetry for Herbert is justifiable if the artist’s heart is right before God, Hopkins requires only that the artist be true to himself. That is not necessarily as romantically Satanic as it might at first sound, because Hopkins is sure that the artistic individuality revealed flows from Christ’s originating presence.<sup>91</sup> Yet the formulation would still mystify Herbert.

Art may be neutral, but the same is not true of its creator. ‘How All is One Way Wrought’ asserts that, although the work of art itself is “neither right nor wrong” (24) (“No more than red and blue/No more than Re and Mi” (25-26)), the artist has responsibilities which the art does not have. Artists must recognise that while artistic quality (good) “grows wild and wide,/Has shades, is nowhere none”, moral rectitude on the other hand (right) “must seek a side/And choose for chieftain one” (33-36). What is crucial, therefore, is the *artist’s* allegiance, “whom he serves or not/Serves and what side he takes” (31-32). For the Jesuit,

<sup>88</sup> Variants of lines 21-22 which Hopkins considered emphasise the potential perfection of art: “This sweetness, all this song,/This piece of perfect good” — see Phillips, p. 362.

<sup>89</sup> Peters, p. 31.

<sup>90</sup> Peters, p. 51.

<sup>91</sup> Contra Miller, above n. 82.





philosophic belief, then you must just do without it".<sup>96</sup> Arnold's reluctance to do this left him resident in a world of shadows, retreating tides and ignorant armies. He has only heard rumours of the visionary gleam that Wordsworth sighted and lost. In the 1870s at least, Hopkins' epistemology leaves him with no need for substitutes: "Unlike the Romantic visionary who would create the world, the Hopkins speaker goes out to observe and respond to God's creation in the world".<sup>97</sup> Because he believes that the source of his observations is Christ, independent of any mortal human, so it will never dry up. Wordsworth may lose the glory and the dream, Arnold may never have seen it, but Hopkins believes that Christ's inscape is always there to be celebrated.

This celebration is Hopkins' praise offering. Like Herbert, he believes that this requires the surrender to God of his self and the arts which express that self. 'To What Serves Mortal Beauty', 'Morning, Midday and Evening Sacrifice' and 'The Golden Echo' all counsel that beauty and ability should be commended to their source in God ("beauty's self and beauty's giver") trusting that he will ensure their best use. 'Morning, Midday and Evening Sacrifice' requires that "thought and threw" (8), "Head, heart, hand, heel, and shoulder" (10) (a list which echoes the heart, soul, mind and strength with which Scripture commands the love of God<sup>98</sup>), are to be employed as tools in God's service. Thus the poem commands its readers to take their God-given faculties

... for tool, not toy meant  
And hold at Christ's employment. (13-14)

In his aborted commentary on the *Spiritual Exercises*, Hopkins comments that "The moment we [repent our sins] we reach the end of our being, we do and are what we were made for, we make it worth God's while to have created us".<sup>99</sup> This is what the poem recommends. Only through assigning its faculties to God's service can humanity reach the summit of its created function. When handing over his unique poetic expression to God, therefore, Hopkins gives back to God what is already his, and so fulfils the purpose for

<sup>96</sup> Eliot (1964), p. 113. Interestingly, Eliot and Hopkins made similar assessments of Arnold. Hopkins considered Arnold's *Empedocles* volume "to have all the ingredients of poetry without quite being it — no ease or something or other" (*Further Letters*, p. 58 (to Edward Bond, 4 August 1873)), which chimes with Eliot's feeling that Arnold displays "an inner uncertainty and lack of confidence and conviction" (*The Use of Poetry*, p. 119).

<sup>97</sup> Kyne, p. 35, quoting Marylou Motto, *Mined with a Motion: The Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1984), p. 1. Compare Peters, p. 20, where he observes that most poets consider "the emotions arising in themselves as due to a great poetic sensibility and not as due principally to any independent activity on the part of the object." For Hopkins, on the contrary, "The emotional activity ascribed to an object by Hopkins is real to him and not fancied".

<sup>98</sup> e.g. Deuteronomy 6.5 and Mark 12.30.

<sup>99</sup> *Sermons*, p. 240; Phillips, p. 364.

which he was created.<sup>100</sup> Although "not salvific in itself", writes Ong, poetry can, "like other human creations . . . serve salvific ends in so far as . . . it related one's own self and other selves to God".<sup>101</sup>

This is apparent in 'The Golden Echo', which, although again primarily concerned with human beauty, spells out that beautiful things are best left in God's care:

. . . deliver it, early now, long before death  
Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God beauty's self and beauty's giver.  
See; not a hair is, not an eyelash, not the least lash lost; every hair  
Is, hair of the head, numbered. (18-21)

If God's care extends to the created beauty of sparrows and the hairs on our heads (Matthew 10.29-31), so too, the poet hopes, it extends to the poet's poems. As "beauty's self and beauty's giver", God will not suffer the wasteless destruction of beauty. Some of the most quoted passages from Hopkins' prose show him employing this principle of surrender, rather like Herbert. Retreat notes from 1883 contain the eerie account of Hopkins' assignation of his poems to God's care:

. . . I earnestly asked our Lord to watch over my compositions, not to preserve them from being lost or coming to nothing, for that I am very willing they should, but [that] they might not do me harm through the enmity or impudence of any man or my own; that he would have them as his own and employ them or not employ them as he would see fit. And this I believe is heard.<sup>102</sup>

Although Hopkins was reluctant to publish in any case, this account remains very moving. The attempt at detachment as to the ultimate fate of his verse is unconvincing beside the parallel eagerness that God would use it. In the end, the ultimate publication of these poems lends an almost prophetic, retrospective validity to the assignation, confirming further gospel analogues from 'The Golden Echo':

Nay, what we had lighthanded left in surly the mere mould  
Will have waked and have waxed and have walked with the wind what while we slept,  
This side, that side hurling a heavy-headed hundredfold  
What while we, while we slumbered. (22-25)

It is the grain of wheat all over again. "Verily, verily," Jesus says, "Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit"

<sup>100</sup> Interestingly, viewed from this perspective, even the terrible sonnets might act in praise of God. Peters does not make this connection explicitly, but he notes that the terrible sonnets are "the perfect expression of [Hopkins'] inscape" when they were composed (Peters, p. 49). If the faithful depiction of inscape is a celebration of God's creation, then these sonnets, unknown to Hopkins, are also part of the praise.

<sup>101</sup> Walter J. Ong SJ, *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), pp. 144-145.

<sup>102</sup> *Sermons*, pp. 253-254 (8 September 1883). To similar effect: *To Dixon*, p. 88 (29 October 1881), "a very spiritual man once told me that with things like composition the best sacrifice was not to destroy one's work but to leave it entirely to be disposed of by obedience. But I can scarcely fancy myself asking a superior to publish a volume of my verses and I own that humanly there is very little likelihood of that ever coming to pass"; *To Bridges*, p. 66 (15 February 1879), "All therefore that I think of doing is to keep my verses together in one place . . . that, if anyone shd. like, they might be published after my death."

(John 12.24). As “waked” grows to “waxed” and thus to “walked”, the ecstatic excitement grows in the breathless realisation that the seed of beauty is best cared for by the divine Gardener. Hopkins’ own poetry is the best evidence of this conviction — having fallen into the morass of obscurity, it has, like Herbert’s, come forth to produce much fruit.

Of course, the praise and celebration poems of the 1870s are much better examples of beauty being used for God’s service than are the ideological poems like ‘How All is One Way Wrought’. The great nature poems celebrate the Christ-ordained form of every individual thing, straining in their exultant rush of words to match their subject matter in a parallel act of poetic recreation. This recreation is part of the process of praise, part of the sacrificial offering of the self and its abilities back to God. McNees, tracing the sacramental current in Hopkins’ poetry, argues that it “enacts a poetics of real presence”.<sup>103</sup> By the inventive use of language, “syntactical paradox”, alliteration and so forth, Hopkins forces the reader

into the physicality of his language, then on to its sense. The sensuous quality of Hopkins’s language demands that the reader participate in language as experience and so narrows the gap between words and the world to which they refer.<sup>104</sup>

Such poetry, therefore, is not simply part of the Reformed sacrifice of praise. Rather, it shares with the sacraments the honourable task of forcing the reader to engage with God’s incarnating work in creation. Almost any of Hopkins’ 1870s poems could be cited to demonstrate this high function in action. The purest example is probably ‘The Windhover’, pure because its ultimate effect — praise of God — is achieved almost unconsciously.<sup>105</sup> Simply by exulting in the glory of the bird’s flight, in something outside of itself, the poem is an offering of praise. This exultation is evident in the ecstatic, alliterative repetition, the present participles and enjambment which drive the poem onwards and mimic the swooping flight of the bird. All illustrate Hopkins’ conviction that poetry is “speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape’s sake”.<sup>106</sup> Remembering of course that, to Hopkins, the uniqueness of every inscape was “word of God”, ‘The Windhover’ therefore fulfils its dedication, displaying what the more theoretical poems labour to communicate. Searching and probing inscape in poetry reminded both him and his readers “more of the Creator, than a superficial impression could have

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<sup>103</sup> McNees, p. 30.

<sup>104</sup> McNees, p. 29.

<sup>105</sup> Conran notes the purity of Hopkins’ poetry in comparison to Thomas’, largely because “praise of God [is] the core of [Hopkins’] purpose” in a way it is not for Thomas. See *The Cost of Strangeness: Essays on the English Poets of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1982), pp. 223–224.

<sup>106</sup> ‘Poetry and Verse’, in *Journals*, p. 289.

done".<sup>107</sup> Moreover, even as it focuses purely on an object outside of itself, the distinctiveness of the poem's language reveals the "individualising touch" of its creator.<sup>108</sup> So committed was Hopkins to poetic individuality, that his poetry inevitably expressed his self, a self already assigned to the service of God. Poetic texture, poetic matter and poet all combine as his sacrifice to God.

This sacrificial surrender is completely necessary, but as Herbert knew, it can be infinitely costly. The grain of wheat must first die before it produces fruit. For Hopkins, the production of poetry was so closely bound up with individuality that its composition was a "very arduous" act which demanded his "entire personality".<sup>109</sup> During the 1870s, while the practice of Hopkins the poet was conditioned by the theology of Hopkins the priest, the priest's personality was generally able to sustain this composition. The theory of God-given inscape provided ideal poetic stimulation for the detail-obsessed poet and it also justified his poetry theologically as praise of God. Yet when Hopkins' appreciation of inscape breaks down, as in the terrible sonnets, major fractures in this accommodation arise. The justification has gone, but the poetry continues to come forth. The terrible sonnets are primarily an issue for the next chapter but when poetry is mentioned in them, the magnitude of the problems at issue is clear. In 'To Seem the Stranger', any "word/Wisest" which the speaker's heart breeds is barred, whether by "dark heaven's baffling ban" or "hell's spell" he can not tell (11-13). Likewise, the poetic lament of 'I Wake and Feel' is sent like a letter to an absent God who "lives alas! away" (8). Arnold and his agnostic contemporaries could have forewarned Hopkins of this experience. Yet having constructed his own poetic frame apart from the tradition, a frame which finds its hope in Christ rather than in the desperation of this world, the horror that results when it begins to wobble is more terrifying than the wistfulness which haunts Arnold.

While the frame stands sure, however, Hopkins dwells in an exultant and knowing security which sets him far apart from his agnostic contemporaries. "The poets of his day failed", writes Peters, summarising Hopkins' verdict on his poetic contemporaries, "because they had nothing to be serious about in their poetry".<sup>110</sup> That is Hopkins of the 1870s, secure in

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<sup>107</sup> Peters, p. 6.

<sup>108</sup> Peters, p. 55.

<sup>109</sup> Peters, p. 59.

<sup>110</sup> Peters, p. 38. Compare, for example, Hopkins' verdict on Swinburne: "a perpetual functioning of genius without truth, feeling, or any adequate matter to be at function on" *To Bridges*, p. 304 (29 April 1889)). Similarly, Tennyson's "gift of utterance is truly golden", but his thoughts are "commonplace" and "wanting in nobility" (*To Bridges*, p. 95 (22 October 1879)).

the religious convictions from which his poetry comes. Thus, like Herbert, Hopkins' theological convictions place him outside the poetic tradition that would exalt the poet to semi-divine status. Both believe that poets take their place under God and that poetry must be merely part of a life sacrificed to God. Yet, Hopkins' work tunes Herbert's insistence on sacrifice to a finer artistic pitch. Herbert believed, ultimately, that an individual's fervent response to God takes precedence over the poetry produced by that emotion and he seeks to lead his readers into such an emotional response. For Hopkins, however, poetry is so tightly bound up with individuality, that it must always express that emotional fervour: "imagery, melodiousness and many other such-like qualities are to Hopkins merely ornamental unless they are woven into the canvas of the poet's inscape, which can only be expressed in sincerity and true feelings".<sup>111</sup> His poetry is a sacrificial expression, from the depths of his being, of that inscape which has its source in Christ. Ultimately, that expression costs him his self, but to one not writing in the Romantic tradition, the poet's self is not a matter of final importance.

*Thomas — poetic airways for the spirit*

Lacking Hopkins' credal conviction, R.S. Thomas has less reason to resist the call of the Romantic legacy. Unlike Herbert and Hopkins, he does not write many praise poems, and when he does, they are uncommon; even, arguably, sinister.<sup>112</sup> Yet like Herbert, Thomas writes many poems on the purpose of poetry. He does not finally submit his poetry to the judgement of theology as Herbert and Hopkins do, yet religious concerns remain fundamental to his poetry of wide-ranging metaphysical speculation, through territory usually considered dangerous for the priest. In the end, however, the poet finds himself in an intriguing relationship of interdependence with the priest, as his poetry seeks to keep alive a spirituality that is opposed to contemporary materialism. The poetry that results can not quite shake off its religious roots and it has as much in common with prayer as with poetry.

Yet Thomas resists overt doctrinal pronouncements, and in this, he is more Arnold's descendant than Hopkins was. Admittedly, Arnold's public pontifications differ from Thomas' wilfully marginal pronouncements from the rebellious marches, and Arnold's patronising approach to Celtic literature does not endear him to Thomas, the aggressive

<sup>111</sup> Peters, p. 33.

<sup>112</sup> D.Z. Phillips, pp. 52-53 sees 'Because' as sinister.

defender of Welsh language and literature.<sup>113</sup> Yet echoes of Arnold's elevation of poetry to a religious role can be heard faintly in some of Thomas' statements on poetry. Unsure of the faith of his ancestors, Arnold as seen above, sought solace in a religion of the poetic idea. He considered everything valuable in religion to be poetry. At times, Thomas seems to advocate a similarly large, public and even religious role for poetry. He "demands", Merchant observes, Shelley's "old and honourable role of 'unacknowledged legislator' for the poet."<sup>114</sup> Likewise, he does not regard theological orthodoxy as having any part in the poet's province<sup>115</sup> and he admits quite openly a "moralistic or propagandist intention",<sup>116</sup> particularly in his early work. Thomas' propaganda is largely on behalf of Wales, so that his arguments for poetry appear less explicitly religious than Arnold's. Nevertheless, when he describes Christianity as something essentially poetic, the "presentation of imaginative truth",<sup>117</sup> his view fits comfortably with Arnold's. Jesus, in Thomas' opinion, is a poet, and as Chapter Five explores, some Thomas poems suggest that he is little more. Even so, Thomas can not abandon his religious heritage. In the essay 'A Frame for Poetry', Thomas, although reluctant to give any particular authority to Christian doctrine, nevertheless argues that Christianity has provided the vital frame for the great Western poetry and that the present dearth of great poetry is due to the decline of Christianity.<sup>118</sup> Although Thomas appears slightly embarrassed in this essay by Christianity's doctrinal content, he nevertheless justifies it, Arnold-like, by a supra-doctrinal appeal to a religion of Culture.

This sort of vision spills over into numerous poems. 'Return'<sup>119</sup> establishes the arts as the source of meaning for the human race, comparing the poet to a fisherman drawn ineluctably back to the river to watch the poem's ripples on the water's surface, the poem a "mandala/for contentment" (6-7). Poetry is a rejection of the voices summoning the poet "to the wrong tasks" (7), presumably the banalities of life that distract from the wonder of the experience of being. Thus the poem concludes that, although art "is not life" nor "the river/carrying us away" (11-13), it is

<sup>113</sup> Wintle, p. 226.

<sup>114</sup> Merchant, p. 24.

<sup>115</sup> "to me any form of orthodoxy is just not part of a poet's province" — Ormond, p. 53; "although I am a priest, I am a free man too" — J.B. Lethbridge, p. 38.

<sup>116</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Words and the Poet', in *R.S. Thomas: Selected Prose*, pp. 51-67 (p. 64).

<sup>117</sup> Gough, p. 65.

<sup>118</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'A Frame for Poetry', in *Selected Prose*, pp. 68-73 (p. 71).

<sup>119</sup> Compare also 'Gallery'.

... the motionless  
 image of itself on a fast-  
 running surface with which life  
 tries constantly to keep up. (13-16)

This conclusion is enigmatic but it suggests that art's self-sufficient perfection defies mortality and time's limitations. Art manifests and embodies the truth of existence, away from the voices with their wrong tasks, closer to ideal perfection, perhaps to the timelessness inhabited by Eliot's Chinese jar, which "still/Moves perpetually in its stillness".<sup>120</sup> Against the mortality of human existence, art offers a route to the unsullied ideal realm. In 'Sonata', similarly, the "chromatic/insistence" (19-20) of a Beethoven sonata is itself an elliptical answer to the insistent metaphysical question, "What is life?" (6). The passionate music of the "key's moonlight" (20-21)<sup>121</sup> provides an intuitive answer to this question by proclaiming, in a phrase Arnold might have invented, "how our art is our meaning" (22). Art, it seems, speaks to the depths of the human spirit, enduring beyond us, reminding us of our essence. There are definitely spiritual suggestions in these ennobled, Platonic visions of art, but there is insufficient dogma to upset Arnold.

If art embodies the essence of human meaning, the artist has an important function. Thomas plays with various images for the poet's role. Merchant cites 'The Cure',<sup>122</sup> where the speaker ponders the vast areas of our culture's "infirm body" that may "Depend solely on a poet's cure" (8-9). Arnold and Richards can almost be heard applauding in the wings.<sup>123</sup> Thomas also considers the poet endowed with a gift of religious insight. Poets in his scheme, as mentioned above, are mediators of divine reality.<sup>124</sup> He suggests elsewhere that only a poet can truly understand the gospel message with its "accumulation of metaphor".<sup>125</sup> Although expressed more authoritatively by Arnold, this strand in Thomas' thinking presents a similarly hieratic vision of the poet's role.

Although drawn towards this position, however, Thomas does not rest in it. He knows that poetry has not lightened the world's darkness nor healed its ills. Instead, marginalised by his culture, the poet has had to wage a guerrilla war against the bleak facticity of existence and the darkness of contemporary life. 'Bravol', protesting against the mortality

<sup>120</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' V.

<sup>121</sup> Probably echoing Beethoven's 'Moonlight' and 'Appassionata' sonatas (opus 27 no. 2 and opus 57).

<sup>122</sup> Merchant, p. 32.

<sup>123</sup> Merchant, p. 26, places Thomas in the line of Plato, Sidney, Johnson and Arnold.

<sup>124</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Introduction to The Penguin Book of Religious Verse', p. 49.

of the woman the speaker loves, considers poems "explosives timed/to go off in the blandness of time's face" (19-20). The poem is not deluded enough to think that art can combat death, but engages instead in a triumphant artistic defiance. The poet will go down fighting, as in 'After Jericho', where the speaker turns his poetic weapons against language's "aggression of fact", insisting delightedly that such facticity can be "resisted successfully/only in verse" (1-3):

Smile, poet,

among the ruins of a vocabulary  
you blew your trumpet against.  
It was a conscript army; your words,  
every one of them, are volunteers. (4-8)

Language is ordinarily "a conscript army" in the service of Thomas' enemies, technology and machinery. Like Arnold, Thomas believes that technology clamours for the place of art and religion.<sup>125</sup> Arnold's cultural weapons against technology are more urbane than Thomas' guerrilla explosions, and given the priest's despair in 'A Priest to His People', Arnold may be more optimistic than Thomas about Culture's ability to instil "a sense of what is indeed beautiful, graceful, and becoming, and to get the raw person to like that".<sup>127</sup> Nevertheless, Thomas would agree loosely with Arnold's aims, allying his crew of volunteer words as motley Sandinista freedom fighters beside Arnold's gentleman soldiers. Both hope that the poet will, like Joshua, storm the polluted land of technology and restore it to its status a land of milk and honey.

The difference between them, however, is that Thomas' acquaintance with twentieth century reality leads him to doubt poetry's capacity to cure the world of its technological ills. This much is apparent in 'The Other', a dramatic monologue whose speaker is "the machine". The machine is Thomas' personification of progress and technology as the agents of spiritual death.<sup>128</sup> In this poem, the machine presents itself as the pitiable victim of humanity's greed but it elicits little sympathy from the reader. Its birth hideously

<sup>125</sup> 'A Frame for Poetry', p. 69. It is not entirely clear what he means by this. In the J.B. Lethbridge interview he describes the resurrection as metaphor because it is presented to us through the words of the evangelists. It is thus apparent that by "metaphor" Thomas does not necessarily mean "factually untrue".

<sup>126</sup> Arnold, 'Culture and Anarchy' in *Selected Prose*, pp. 202-300 (p. 209): "'Faith in machinery is . . . our besetting danger; . . . always in machinery, as if it had a value in and for itself."

<sup>127</sup> Arnold, 'Culture and Anarchy', p. 210.

<sup>128</sup> I do not know the origin of this usage, but am intrigued that Thomas' fellow Welshman, David Jones, uses it in 'A, a, a, Domine Deus' (1966) which unsuccessfully searches technology for "the Living God projected from the Machine" (*The Sleeping Lord* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), p. 9. This is very similar to the way that Thomas uses the figure of the machine.



parodies the Incarnation,<sup>129</sup> as it jumps "into the world/smiling [its] cogged smile" (6-7). But this incarnation brings no healing. The machine not only bites but breaks the welcoming hands of the world extended to feed it (8-9). The grip of its "iron hand" is inescapable, so that when people try to revolt, the machine is ready for them, "crop[ping] them like tall/grass", "munch[ing] on the cud of nations" (11-13). And, crucially, the poet is powerless to resist this enslaving onslaught. The machine is ready for him as well:

Ice  
 in your veins, the poet  
 taunted; the life in you  
 ticking away; your breath  
 poison. I took him apart  
 verse by verse, turning  
 on him my x-ray  
 eyes to expose the emptiness  
 of his interiors. In houses  
 with no hearth he huddles  
 against me now, mortgaging  
 his dwindling techniques  
 for the amenities I offer.

(15-27)

This poem is therefore conscious of a complexity which Arnold downplays. He assumes that the human technocrats will wish to sit benignly at the instructive feet of poetic culture, overlooking the fact that the evils of technology flow inevitably from human ingenuity. But 'The Other' makes humanity utterly complicit in the technological destruction, because the capacity to create technology has always lain dormant "in the mind's mortuary" (3). And the machine's reign is no more than humanity has asked for: "Come out, they shouted" (4), and so the machine comes. Those who call after strange gods come to be their slaves and against this march, poets and culture are completely powerless.<sup>130</sup> The poet's taunts make no impression on the machine's impregnable armour, and indeed, the poem suggests the poet's eventual capitulation before this onslaught. After his initial defiance, he has mortgaged his craft for the convenient "amenities" of the technological society. In league with the machine, art inevitably dies, and human spirituality dies with it. Thus religion comes back into the frame, for poetry's failure is attributable to its unholy alliance with the machine which has severed its traditional alliance with religion. The poets stand judged for embracing the machine and not adequately defending the spirit.

Technology's usurpation of religion is explicit in 'Aubade' which switches from the machine's point of view to the human, only to find that poetry is displaced there also. The

<sup>129</sup> Compare *Counterpoint*, pp. 24-25, 30.

poem opens with references to "dew" and "the voice of time singing", suggesting the dawn of creation.<sup>131</sup> Yet this creation is sullied from the beginning, for the machine is already present at the beginning of time, appearing as a seductress, Eve and the serpent combined,

all fly-wheels and pistons;  
her smile invisible

as a laser. (7-9)

The machine here reverses any concept of Nature's female benevolence. It assumes instead the destructive female role from the reservoirs of myth. She is Lilith, Circe, Medusa, or one of the Harpies or Furies. Like Medusa, the machine has a petrifying smile and against it, the speaker's protests are silenced:

... 'No,'  
I cried, 'No' turning away  
into the computed darkness  
where she was waiting

for me, with art's stone  
rolled aside from her belly  
to reveal the place poetry had lain  
with the silicon angels in attendance. (9-16)

Darkness should provide a retreat, space for meditation and contemplation. Sometimes in Thomas it functions as the repose of the ineffable God.<sup>132</sup> However, just as the machine in "The Other" mocks the Incarnation, here the darkness of the Gethsemane grave is "computed", flooded with technological effluent. Thomas has said when interviewed that the poet of the twenty-first century should be seeking to "open up new . . . airways for the spirit" in the face of the influence of science and technology.<sup>133</sup> Yet that interview and this poem imply that the poets are failing in that task, for art, which like the empty tomb should preserve the mystery of faith has been pushed aside by "silicon angels", inadequate substitutes for the real thing who are intent on de-mystifying existence and denying spirituality. Art's vitality has been frozen under technology's Medusa-like glare.

Thus the argument Thomas advanced in 'A Frame for Poetry' re-surfaces. If religion is impossible without the protection of "art's stone", both poem and essay suggest that art is easily pushed aside when it lacks a spiritual foundation. Poetry reaches beyond the material

<sup>130</sup> Compare 'Postscript' where the only human sound in the aftermath of the machine's victory is "the lament of/The poets for deciduous language" (11-12). "As life improved, their poems/Grew sadder and sadder" (1-2). 'The oil for the machine becomes the "vinegar in the poets' cup" (4).

<sup>131</sup> As imagined in such mythopoeic poems as 'The Hand', 'The Tool' and 'Once': "As though born again/I stepped out into the cool dew . . . Astonished at the mingled chorus/Of weeds and flowers" (7-8, 10-11).

<sup>132</sup> Compare 'Via Negativa' (where God keeps "the darkness/Between stars"); 'In Church' where the praying man tests his faith in "the darkness" of the church.

<sup>133</sup> Ned Thomas and John Barnie, 'Probings', p. 40.

words on the page, the aggression of fact, so that, when silicon angels are allowed to replace real ones, poetry will disappear with them:

It was . . .  
because they had ceased  
to believe, the poem passed them  
by . . .<sup>134</sup>

Coy and muted though it is, 'Thomas' appeal to religion in 'Aubade' and 'A Frame for Poetry' shows him hesitant to follow completely Arnold's drift towards doctrineless Christianity. To be sure, it is difficult to tell how much he uses Christian iconography in an allusive rather than a doctrinal way. He is no T.S. Eliot, who sought, unashamedly, to assess artistic works from a definitely Christian ethical and theological standpoint.<sup>135</sup> Thomas' work lacks the monolithic surety of Eliot's pronouncement. Neither does he see the poet's task as a simple offering of sacrificial praise nor the expression of individual inscape. Thomas is too influenced by Eliot's escape from personality for that. Rather, he sees the poet's task as keeping open the possibility of mystery, guarding the passes of spirituality against the ravages of the machine. And he returns to the priest's imagery to do so. Thus, 'Aubade' retains a degree of ambiguity which may offer some hope for it does not tell the reader where poetry has gone from the silence of the grave. If it has only been abducted by technology and not destroyed, it may yet return in triumph.

Indeed, despite the universal havoc the machine has wrought, Thomas maintains a vision of an alternative condition of existence where human dignity is respected and poetry takes precedence over technology. It is a vision which merges with that of the kingdom of heaven, stressing again the connection between religion and poetry's proper calling. In prose, Thomas remembers wistfully his youthful ideal of a Wales motivated by language rather than enslaved to technology. Although the elderly Thomas admits this ideal to be naive, he hankers after it nonetheless:

Could not the Welsh language through the power of words evolve an alternative culture? Would it not be possible, not to put the clock back . . . not to be reactionary, but to travel a little to one side? . . . I later lost my nerve to some extent. But with the growth of the green movement, of Schumacher's idea of the small as beautiful; with the realisation as to where greed and megalomania were taking us on a round earth, many of whose resources are not renewable, I have begun to wonder whether I was so wrong after all.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> 'Nativity'.

<sup>135</sup> T.S. Eliot 'Religion and Literature', in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p. 388.

<sup>136</sup> R.S. Thomas, *Cymru or Wales?* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1992), p. 12.



In preventing the destruction of the human spirit, therefore, poetry has a vital role to play. By extension, poets should be beacons of this alternative reality and poetry, though not linked explicitly to Christian doctrine, establishes an ideal which Thomas combines with the spiritual vision of the kingdom of heaven. This is in line with a key poem from *Counterpoint* which contrasts the brightness of the poetic vocation with the twilight of civilisation.<sup>142</sup> In the face of humanity's short-sighted greed, the poem salutes those "shining sentinels" (3), poets particularly, who rediscover and celebrate the small as beautiful, bringing light into the world. Significantly, the two poets named, Yeats and Edward Llyd, are from the Celtic West, but the poem finally charges the whole poetic company with retaining a vision of the "beauty and madness" of the world against an apocalyptic backdrop of spiritless darkness. All poets should be sentinels who bring some light into the world's gloom:

The poets,  
all of them, in all languages,  
pausing on their migration  
between thought and word  
to watch here with me now  
the moon come to its fifteenth phase  
from whose beauty and madness  
men have withdrawn these last days,  
hand on heart, to its far  
side of sanity and darkness. (17-26)

Volk-Birke glosses these final two nouns as "reasonableness, expediency, pragmatism" and "lack of vision, spiritual dearth, aimlessness".<sup>143</sup> It is this vacancy of spirit, heralded by the triumph of the machine, which is destroying humanity. Humans have turned their backs on that which satisfies the spirit, preferring darkness to light,<sup>144</sup> sanity to madness. They have sought the far side of the moon, away from Yeats' fifteenth phase that represents the "Unity of Being", "entire beauty" where physical and spiritual beauty are reconciled.<sup>145</sup> That is the order of "beauty and madness" which Thomas suggests poets represent: an order open to the terrifying mystery and unpredictability of the spirit, opposed to the reductionist materialism of scientism. Poets are its last guardians, warning humanity against its headlong rush into the spiritless abyss.

<sup>142</sup> *Counterpoint*, p. 57, ("On an evening like this . . .")

<sup>143</sup> Sabine Volk Birke, "World History from B.C. to A.D.: R.S. Thomas' *Counterpoint*", *Literature and Theology*, 9 (1995), 199-226 (p. 218).

<sup>144</sup> John 3.19.

<sup>145</sup> W.B. Yeats, *A Critical Edition of Yeats's A Vision (1925)*, ed. by George Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood (London: Macmillan, 1978), pp. 13, 32, 69. Thomas is using the power of Yeats' symbolism here without subscribing wholeheartedly to his esoteric philosophy. Thomas has described Yeats as somewhat prone to "blamey" (J.B. Lethbridge, p. 47).

The poem gives no indication, however, that poets will successfully arrest this decline. In Yeats' *Vision*, when phase 15 has passed, "the soul's unity has been found *and lost*" and the forms "begin to jostle and fall into confusion".<sup>146</sup> The cloud of poetic witnesses has arrested the speaker's gloom (2-3), but he recognises that they can only "watch" with him the decline of the "last days". Yeats' candle (5) and Glyndwr's fire (16) are swallowed up by the oncoming darkness.<sup>147</sup> Before similar despair, Arnold pondered whether poetry could save us. The echoes of Yeats and the Bible in these poems indicate that, for Thomas, any salvation (and there may be none) lies outside human control. Thus, Thomas seems to believe that poetry is not the truth, but that it can warn against the folly of the age and point to an alternative vision. It announces, contrary to the drift of the age, that spiritual truth must still be sought. As Merchant writes,

Thomas is too clear-sighted to confuse the moral, theological and imaginative roles and his poetry is about the business of sharpening sensibility, of focusing discrimination. By the astringency of the poet's attitudes . . . the bogus is winnowed from the true and those elements that make for life and enrichment are distinguished from those which atrophy the mind and the heart.<sup>148</sup>

Thomas' poetry is neither morality nor theology. Instead, it returns a sceptical attention to them, seeking always to enrich mind and heart with the quest for truth. Thus the poem quoted above from 'Counterpoint' approves Yeats for his continual search, his "poring" and "discovering" (6-7), rather than for his conclusions. Indeed, the mature speaker of 'Waiting' abandons his youthful approval of Yeats and returns to read Yeats in old age with "Fingers burned, heart/seared, a bad taste/in the mouth", reading "without trust" and asking cynically, "What counsel/has the pen's rhetoric/to impart?" (4-10). Such a curt question typifies Thomas' stark poetry which values insistent questioning and tentative, deflating enjambment over florid rhetoric. Thomas' poems are pared down to minimalist statement, with none of Sidney's intoxicating but ultimately deceptive rhetorical eloquence. Thus 'Waiting' dismisses the counsel of the "pen's rhetoric" which is to

Break mirrors, stare  
ghosts in the face, try  
walking without crutches  
  
at the grave's edge . . . (10-13)

Thomas' speaker believes that reality matches neither this optimistic poetic assessment nor the blind optimism of naive religious faith which these images evoke. Rather, the witness of Thomas' poetry is that poetry emerges from "the pain", from "the dark wood" and the

<sup>146</sup> Yeats, p. 203 (emphasis added).

<sup>147</sup> Volk-Birke, p. 218.

<sup>148</sup> Merchant, p. 26.

songs of "doom's nightingales".<sup>149</sup> It is drawn from "the dark well" of "gulped tears" and wiped from "cracked lips".<sup>150</sup> If poetry denies these realities and presents Sidney's golden world, Thomas seems to condemn it as a deceptive fraud. Poetry, he suggests, can only be written in full acknowledgement of the darkness.

Yet the poet does not condemn its readers simply to watch in the gathering apocalyptic gloom. 'Waiting' tentatively proposes an alternative task which offers an important revision of poetry's purpose. If optimistically exuberant poetry is an inadequate response to the magnitude of the crisis facing humanity, the poet must nevertheless maintain an alternative vision in "the small hours/of belief" (14-15), drawing refreshment from the sources of mystery. The "one eloquence/to master" (15-16) is other than Yeats', and it is that of

... the bowed head, the bent  
knee, waiting, as at the end  
  
of a hard winter  
for one flower to open  
on the mind's tree of thorns. (17-21)

The mature Thomas might consider his earlier self guilty of excessive rhetoric, but the attitude of "the bowed head" and "bent/knee" is constant throughout his poetry as the only appropriate response to life's perplexity. Poet and poetry must wait on the fruition which signals the gracious visitation of God's presence,<sup>151</sup> wait even through "the small hours/of belief" in a hard winter. As spring follows winter, perhaps the flowers of resurrection will grow on the mind's tree of thorns. Poetry is not enough to cause this growth, but it can point towards it and wait expectantly for it all the same.<sup>152</sup>

Thus, although Thomas' poetry acknowledges its own insufficiency, this is not a total rejection of poetry. The declaration of prayerful waiting in 'Waiting' is public and poetic as well as private. Indeed, throughout Thomas, the crossover between prayer and poetry is

<sup>149</sup> 'Petition' (8), 'Remembering David Jones' (1,2).

<sup>150</sup> 'The Dark Well' (15), 'No' (15).

<sup>151</sup> See 'The Belfry' (16-17). Compare, perhaps, the budding of Aaron's staff (Numbers 17.8) and the story of Joachim and Anna.

<sup>152</sup> Similar indications that man can not live on poetry alone are found throughout Thomas: 'Death of a Poet' ("Sorry for the lies, for the long failure/In the poet's war"); 'Because' ("On the smudged empires the dust/Lies and in the libraries/Of the poets"); 'He' ("the thin dribble/Of his poetry dries on the rocks/Of a harsh landscape under an ailing sun"); 'Passage', where Shakespeare, Donne, Shelley and Yeats all prove insufficient guides and the poet is left "in the poem's empty church"; 'One Life' ("Literature is on the way/Out"). Conran's comments on 'Poetry for Supper' are interesting. He argues that Thomas seems to regard the two poets who feature in that poem as "slightly absurd and irrelevant", even if they are "admirable and lovable" (Conran (1982), p. 228).

often virtually invisible. In its spiritual awareness and its refusal to be overcome by technology and the clamour of foolish optimism, the silent waiting of prayer shares many of the qualities Thomas deems essential to poetry. Consequently, much of his poetry, especially his later poetry, draws on the discipline of prayerful waiting. Mindful always of gulped tears and cracked lips, these poems' circumspect nudging avoids overly optimistic conclusions in the search for knowledge of God. 'The New Mariner', for example, describes such prayerful-poetic nudges as "probes"<sup>153</sup> (10) launched into "God-space" (8), the meditative silence where prayer and poetry blur. The new mariner has abandoned earthly regions for the realms Ulysses sought, "Beyond the utmost bound of human thought"; "that untravelled world, whose margin fades/For ever and for ever".<sup>154</sup> He is looking for God's country, but there is in these poems little of the guileless elation that marks those poems which imagine a poetic future. Instead, the new mariner's exploration involves uncertainty, puckered brows and unsettling findings such as the disturbing paradox that God's silence is "his chosen medium/of communication" (2-3). Silence suggests prayer, but communication suggests something more akin to poetry. The mariner, further, has the daunting task of "telling/others about" this silence "in words" (3-5). This consigns the speaker to be "the sport/of reason" (6-7), but in the world of paradox, reason has been tried in the balance and found wanting.<sup>155</sup> Thus the mariner-speaker is left to explore the paradox, turning the poetry into prayer, and the prayer into poetry. Throughout, Thomas' short-line jab and disruptive enjambment capture the nervousness of the explorer caught between inner and outer space, the inner "distance/within that the tireless signals/come from" (17-19) and outside, "the void/over [his] head" (16-17). Stuck in this paradox, he must report back what he has learned there even though God communicates in silence:

And astronaut  
on impossible journeys  
to the far side of the self  
I return with messages  
I cannot decipher, garrulous  
about them, worrying the ear  
of the passer-by, hot on his way  
to the marriage of plain fact with plain fact. (19-26)

<sup>153</sup> As does 'Bleak Liturgies': "The prayer probes/have been launched and silence/closes behind them." (56-58).

<sup>154</sup> Tennyson, 'Ulysses', lines 32, 20-21. The poem contains other echoes of 'Ulysses': "I had looked forward/to old age as a time/of quietness". There may also be an echo of the beatific moment in the walled garden from Eliot's 'Burnt Norton', in that Thomas' speaker considers old age a time "to watch memories ripening/in the sunlight of a walled garden" (14-15).

<sup>155</sup> See below, Chapter Six for discussion of the poet priest as the fool, the ultimate "sport of reason".



This is the poet's task, worrying the ears of his readers with reports from his glimpses of the promised land, his confrontations with the unknown God, or his experience of moments of grace. He is consumed by the need to report news that unsettles the materialist assumptions of those passionate only about plain facts.

Of course, this returns the poet to his slightly cabbalist position. Constrained to report back what he has seen of the spiritual realm, he is in some sense a privileged being and 'Emerging' suggests that his spiritual insights are inseparable from the poems themselves. Gleaning knowledge of God in 'Emerging' is akin to the patient construction of an artistic masterpiece: knowledge of God "must be put together/like a poem or a composition/in music" (8-10). Simile is then abandoned for literalism in the assertion that "what [God] conforms to/is art" (10-11). The Maker of makers is best discerned by other makers, it seems, and it takes an artist to communicate this. Thus, in communicating his awareness of God's presence, Thomas often describes God as an artist, musician or poet:

You run off your scales of  
rain water and sea water, play  
the chords of the morning  
and evening light, sculpture  
with shadow, join together leaf  
by leaf, when spring  
comes, the stanzas of  
an immense poem . . .

('Praise', 10-17)

. . . The rock,  
so long speechless, is the library  
of his poetry . . .

('Suddenly', 8-10)

The sombre awe in such descriptions suggests the response of Thomas the artist to the art of the master Maker. The poet's art best interprets God's mysterious presence to the world. But this is not the same as saying that poetry is the basis of religion. If pushed, Thomas would probably agree with Eliot that Arnold was too rational about poetry and regarded it too much as a moral exercise.<sup>156</sup> Poetry is not "at bottom" the "criticism of life" which Arnold maintains, for, says Eliot,

At bottom is a great way down; the bottom is the bottom. At the bottom of the abyss is what few ever see, and what those cannot bear to look at for long; and it is not a 'criticism of life'. If we mean life as a whole . . . from top to bottom, can anything that we can say of it ultimately, of that awful mystery, be called criticism? We bring back very little from our rare descents, and that is not criticism.<sup>157</sup>

Perhaps those who attempt that descent can only bring back art. Certainly, Thomas' poetry reports in hushed terms what he has seen of the abyss, what he has seen when

<sup>156</sup> Tony Conran comments that Thomas' "basically romantic view of the imagination as prime justifier of mankind is gradually weathered and eroded away" (Conran (1982), p. 252).

suspended with Kierkegaard over 70,000 fathoms. These reports are mixed, but they cohere in part with Eliot's description of the poet as one who sees life in all its truth: "the boredom, and the horror", as well as "the glory".<sup>158</sup> The best poets, says 'Groping', are "pioneers who died for truth" on their journey into "the interior" (21, 5). In 'Groping', Thomas' speaker, like Wordsworth and Eliot, hears the call of the interior and follows them on the dark poetic quest inwards in search of the source of the call.<sup>159</sup>

Thomas' view of poetry is thus poised between Arnold's and Eliot's. From his vantage point at the close of the twentieth century, he knows that poetry cannot save humanity. Yet neither, as the equal ranking of Wordsworth and Eliot in 'Groping' suggests, can he quite share Eliot's dogmatic confidence in credal Christianity. Rather, he sees poetry's task as continuing the spiritual search, standing for the truth of the spirit against the debilitating ravages of the machine, drawing its wings "between barbarism and ourselves" ('A Poet' (20)). The poetry which comes from these inner journeys sometimes returns with tales of giants, sometimes laden with treasures of light and grace, sometimes burdened with anguish; on rare occasions, dancing for joy.

### *Joyful Submission, Painful Sacrifice and Spiritual Vision*

If, as Chapter Two suggested, priests stand at the margins of society, poets customarily demand more attention than this. Since the Renaissance, the poetic tradition has moved the poet ever closer to the centre. This suits Thomas well, for his conception of poetry requires maximum publicity in its harangue against a spiritless world. In general, he is not affected by Hopkins and Herbert's all-encompassing theology of sacrifice which makes them reluctant to allow poetry to occupy centre stage. At face value, poetry sits easily with their theologies, for the aim of sacrifice is praise, and Herbert and Hopkins try in their poetry, as in their lives, to show how poetry can be turned to praise God. To bypass the Romantic view of the poet as the spokesman of divine truth, Hopkins develops a poetics of praise focused on the inscapes of Christ's creation. When his poetry celebrates these inscapes in its own unique way, it avoids Romantic arrogance by praising God. Herbert's poetry is not always overt in its praise of God. Yet this is the overall effect of his poetry as

<sup>157</sup> *The Use of Poetry*, p. 111.

<sup>158</sup> *The Use of Poetry*, p. 106.

<sup>159</sup> For the haunting and expansive description of Wordsworth turning "from the great hills/of the north to the precipice/of his own mind" and letting himself "down for the poetry stranded/on the bare ledges" (7-11) compare 'Dialectic' ("the mind swinging/to and fro over an abysm/of blankness") and Book XIV of *The*

it examines God's control over the world and his life. It extends the principle of submission that, as Chapter Two showed, characterises his understanding of all vocations, so that all his experiences and talents are offered in a poetry of sacrificial praise to God. Hopkins and Herbert prove this sacrifice of all to God in their willingness to risk obscurity by surrendering fame and publishing posthumously. This is perhaps easier for Herbert than Hopkins, in that, Herbert does not have to fight the Romantic elevation of the poet. Herbert is quite happy for his poetry to be overtaken by God's writing, in poetry and in life. Hopkins also tries to justify his art through sacrifice, believing that everything is to be held at Christ's employment, yet justification remains the order of the day. When spontaneously reflecting on other inscapes, his poetry needs no justification. Only when the poet pauses to consider his art does he appear uneasy at his decision to write. In the end, he also doggedly applies the principles of sacrifice to his verse, willing to forego fame and leave the fate of his poetry to God's grace. Yet as the misgivings of the terrible sonnets show, his poetry is never harmonised easily into his rigorous view of life as it is in Herbert's broader world-view of drama and story.

Thomas is not much concerned with sacrifice. He is instead drawn with Arnold towards Romanticism, tempted to give poetry the power and to declare poets the unrivalled legislators of the universe. Yet experience finally prevents him from doing so, and this leads him tentatively back to his Christian heritage. Although he calls all poets, religious or not, to the task of maintaining a spiritual vision of reality, he is not Yeats and will not spurn his Christian roots. Although unable to dwell as assuredly in the Christian revelation as Herbert does and as Hopkins wishes to do, his poetic visions are nevertheless couched in Christian language and symbolism, hesitantly used, but used all the same. His Christian roots and his Christian duty prevent him from becoming the Wordsworth of the twentieth century.

Thus, in different ways, all three of these priest-poets implement Sidney's dictum that poetry creates what should be, rather than what is, and they do so to create a religious poetry which Sidney avoided. Some of Thomas' poetry holds out a vision of the agrarian kingdom of God in opposition to contemporary obsessions with the machine. If that vision appears too optimistic for present realities, other bleaker poetry quests after God as humanity's only hope. Herbert's work invites readers to an eschatological redemption of

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*Prelude*, where, climbing Snowdon, Wordsworth beholds "the emblem of a Mind/That feeds upon infinity,

the universe that begins in the here and now, anticipated (as the previous chapter showed) in the eucharist, but also in the redeemed wit of poetry. In the 1870s, Hopkins is the least oriented towards a future vision. Yet he too calls his readers to see the world in a new way that appreciates Christ's beauty in all living things. All three of them stand outside the poetic mainstream, looking beyond poetry for the fulfilment it promises.

## Chapter Four — Vocations under Strain

### *The priest-poet and suffering*

In treating the vocations of poetry and priesthood quite separately, the preceding chapters suggest that the three priest-poets discover different ways of living out their vocations in a disjunctive universe. This is never a matter of reconciliation as much as accommodation, for the universe displays a fragmentation often inimical to vocational stability. Further, these tentative glimpses of vocational accommodation represent an ideal situation which should not disguise the difficulties that plague the priest-poets in reaching their vocational understandings. Indeed, especially when their poetry is engulfed by suffering and affliction, the yoke of the priesthood sits heavily on them. This chapter focuses on their responses to such unsettling experiences of pain and heartbreak, where the tension between poetry and priesthood is greatest. It argues that in these experiences, the priest-poets can be seen responding to the pain by finding modes of ministry which address the element of suffering in human experience. Thus Herbert's personal afflictions form the basis of a pastoral understanding which enables him to guide his readers as their fellow pilgrim on the Christian way. Hopkins' devastations force him to admit that the priest's sacramental theology does not simply recollect Christ's inscaping presence but also Christ's death and agony. His poetry must, like the sacraments, become a further painful, sacramental sacrifice. Thomas responds to the devastation around him by assuming the prophet's mantle in order to challenge his readers' reliance on technology and their indifference to faith. In each case, poetry which results from confronting the moments of darkness continues what each priest-poet regards as the essence of his priestly task.

### *Hopkins — the priest of gall and heartburn*

This chapter begins with Hopkins, for his vocational clashes are the most painful and the most remarked. Yet as the previous chapter indicated, when the relationship between Hopkins' theology and his poetry are viewed on the priest's terms, there is no incompatibility between them. In fact, Hopkins encouraged Patmore, a fellow Catholic, to write. For himself, however, this accommodation was only permissible when pursued according to the priest's clearly marked vocational boundaries. Hopkins' letters to both Dixon and Bridges make clear that he believed poetry had to be subordinate to his priestly

function.<sup>1</sup> Yet only in the terrible sonnets does the inadequacy of this arrangement become clear. For the sonnets recollect the contaminated self, the bitter experience of being “gall” and “heartburn”, with such vivid emotional immediacy that they uncover Hopkins’ misgivings about his vocational suppression. In this sense, Harris suggests that the sonnets are a failure when measured against Hopkins’ earlier standards, because, trapped inside Hopkins’ solipsistic prison, they do not communicate Christ’s inscape.<sup>2</sup> With similar logic, Miller reads the sonnets as Hopkins’ discovery that poetry is *not* “trivial or neutral”, but is instead a species of self-affirmation, and therefore “a means to damnation”.<sup>3</sup> The argument of the previous chapter suggests that this bold claim cannot apply to all Hopkins’ poetry. Yet the fact that Miller can make it demonstrates the enormous tone shift between the nature poems and the terrible sonnets. It is nigh impossible to discern whether these dark cries of desolation are the damned cries of the poet of self-expression or experiences of the dark night of the soul. Yet in the tension between these two alternatives, the poetry plumbs depths of spiritual and emotional reality that Hopkins had hitherto ignored. If earlier poems seek to inscape Christ’s sacramental presence in nature, the terrible sonnets, in fearful memory of the cross, unwillingly recollect what is sometimes a frightening divine presence and sometimes God’s total absence. Hopkins’ sonnets therefore grind out the paradoxes present in the priest’s eucharistic duties but too easily suppressed by his optimistic theology. Thus the sonnets waver between terrifying presence and devastating absence, just as the eucharist signals a curious admixture of life and death. Paradoxically, therefore, the sonnets complete Hopkins’ priestly task because they complete his identification with Christ on the way of suffering which the parish of his readers must also tread. They communicate the inscape of the cross.

Indirectly, therefore, the horror of the sonnets can be traced to the strict categorisation which Hopkins imposed upon himself in his convert’s determination to write verse only in the service of his religious vocation.<sup>4</sup> Herbert sacrifices to God a poetry which deals with life in its entirety, but Hopkins’ contrasting understanding of sacrifice involves carefully

<sup>1</sup> e.g. *To Bridges*, pp. 24 (6 August 1878), 46 (21 August 1878), 66 (15 February 1879), 179 (11 May 1883), 197 (21 August 1884); *To Dixon*, pp. 14 (5 October 1878), 88 (2 November 1881), 93-94 (1 December 1881). See also Appendix V to *Journals*, pp. 537-539 (p. 539).

<sup>2</sup> Harris, pp. 129-132.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, p. 335.

<sup>4</sup> To Baillie he wrote that he wished still to write as a priest, “not so freely” as he would like, “but no doubt what wd. best serve the cause of my religion” — *Further Letters*, p. 231 (12 February 1868).

screening what parts of life his poetry presents to God.<sup>5</sup> This attitude has its roots not just in Hopkins' theology, but also in his ascetic temperament<sup>6</sup> and the asceticism of an age which presumed that "the harder course must, by virtue of its hardness, be the more virtuous".<sup>7</sup> Becoming a Jesuit therefore gave Hopkins' natural asceticism something to work on and his actions thereafter show that there can, Bender says, "be no doubt which vocation he valued more",<sup>8</sup> or at least resolved to value. Evidence of this abounds: the symbolic burning of his poems; the self-imposed prohibition on private poetic composition between 1868 and 1875; his paranoia over Dixon's unsolicited moves to publish 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' and 'The Wreck of the Eurydice'. Such evidence bespeaks someone prepared to sacrifice his poetry on the altar of priesthood, not because there was anything inherently wrong with poetry, but because he was convinced that the claims of the priesthood were ultimately more serious. Hopkins' actions were, Robinson suggests, grand gestures of renunciation which symbolically marked to him that the claims of his order were greater than the claims of the Muse.<sup>9</sup> His scrupulous interpretation of his religious obedience demanded that he refuse publication and fame,<sup>10</sup> for he believed that the religious life required such sacrifices.

Indeed, the scholastic distinction between the affective and elective wills, natural inclination and God-guided resolve, can be construed this way.<sup>11</sup> Although Hopkins knew in theory that nature and grace should be "co-partners . . . in the redemption of their shared cosmos",<sup>12</sup> he had difficulty applying this in a balanced fashion. Continually, he was tempted to deny nature, to subjugate the affective to the elective will without

<sup>5</sup> Hopkins' analysis of his situation has been adopted by some of his staunchest Catholic biographers. Nancy Benvenaga, for example, (*Gerard Manley Hopkins: Priest, Poet, Saint* (London: Incorporated Catholic Truth Society, 1993)), believes that poetry and beauty threatened to lead him away from the love of God (p. 8). Compare Chester Burnis SJ ('Gerard Manley Hopkins, Poet of Ascetic and Aesthetic Conflict', in *Immortal Diamond: Studies in Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. by Norman Weyand SJ (London: Sheed & Ward, 1949), pp. 175-191) who sees it less in theological terms but who argues from personal experience that "Religious orders have no crying need of poets" (p. 176).

<sup>6</sup> From a young age, Hopkins' ascetic tendencies had expressed themselves in great resolutions and efforts of will-power. See, e.g. Martin, pp. 15, 17 etc.

<sup>7</sup> John Robinson, *In Extremity: A Study of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 5; Pick, p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> Todd K. Bender, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Classical Background and Critical Reception of His Works* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, pp. 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Compare comments to Dixon: "The question then . . . is not whether I am willing to make a sacrifice of hopes of fame . . . but whether I am not to undergo a severe judgment from God for the lothness I have shown in making it . . ." (*To Dixon*, p. 88 (4 November 1881)).

<sup>11</sup> *Sermons*, 149-159, discussed in Appendix II by Devlin at pp. 338-351. Also discussed by, e.g. Miller, pp. 329ff; David Jasper, 'God's Better Beauty: Language and the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins', *Christianity and Literature*, 34 (1985) 9-22, (pp. 15-16).

acknowledging the goodness of the emotions and affections.<sup>13</sup> Of course, Hopkins had no such problems in the unrivalled theological celebration and poetic freedom of the poetry he wrote in Wales. Yet there, he was convinced that his affective response to nature glorified Christ. Emotions which did not fit this theological poetic scheme, however, had to be banished accordingly.

Of course, Hopkins is not alone in considering renunciation a virtue. Christianity has a strong ascetic tradition and the Christian Scriptures continually call believers to take up the cross and follow Christ (Mark 8.34), to offer their entire selves in God's service (Romans 12.1). In his willingness to surrender his poetic gift to God, therefore, Hopkins was simply applying a central strand of Christian teaching. His own theology of the great sacrifice, which shaped his self-understanding and his understanding of Christ, was formed largely around these doctrines.<sup>14</sup> Fidelity to Christ's model therefore required from Hopkins a willingness to undergo "the hardest sacrifices",<sup>15</sup> for Christ was, as Downes says, "the central sacrificial figure of his calling".<sup>16</sup> Even there, in Christ's example, there is a hint that poetry which truly follows Christ's example will not shy from the descent into the depths of hell's despair.

In the meantime, however, Hopkins' poetry avoids such terrifying descents. Instead, he contains his poetry with a rational,<sup>17</sup> watertight theological system. This containment is evident in a letter where Hopkins responds to Bridges' complaint that formulated doctrine has no room for mystery. Hopkins' reply expresses wholehearted belief in Catholic mystery, but it also remains decidedly theoretical:

... a Catholic by mystery means an incomprehensible certainty: without certainty, without formulation there is no interest ...; the clearer the formulation the greater the interest. At bottom the source of interest is ... the unknown, the reserve of truth beyond what the mind reaches and still feels to be behind. ... there are some solutions to, say, chess problems so beautifully ingenious, some resolutions of suspensions so lovely in music that even the feeling of interest is keenest when they are known and over, and for some time survives the discovery. How must it

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<sup>12</sup> Justus George Lawler, *Hopkins Re-Constructed: Life, Poetry and the Tradition* (New York: Continuum, 1998), p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> Downes (1959), p. 135; McChesney, pp. 146-147; Devlin in *Sermons*, pp. 116ff, 215f.

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Thomas, p. 27; *Sermons*, p. 290, n. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. by John Riches and others, 7 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982-1991), vol III, *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, (1986), p. 358. Von Balthasar goes on to say that this includes the sacrifice of the aesthetic sphere.

<sup>16</sup> David A. Downes, "Self Flashes": Ricoeur's Achieved Self in Hopkins', in *Rereading Hopkins* (1996), pp. 46-62, (p. 55).

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, as early as 1864, Hopkins complains that faith without belief in the Real Presence is "illogical" (*Further Letters*, p. 17 (to E.H. Coleridge, 1 June 1864)).



then be when the very answer is the most tantalising statement of the problem and the truth you are to rest in the most pointed putting of the difficulty!<sup>18</sup>

Christian mystery, that is, involves a clash of certainties and Hopkins goes on to describe the Trinity and the Incarnation in these terms. While some people regard the mystery of the Trinity as "an equation in theology, the dull algebra of schoolmen", for others it is "news of their dearest friend", the absolute "ecstasy of interest". The mystery of the Incarnation lies in the "locked and inseparable combination" of the certainty that "Christ is in every sense God and in every sense man":

Therefore we speak of the events of Christ's life as the mystery of the Nativity, the mystery of the Crucifixion and so on of a host; the mystery being always the same, that the child in the manger is God, the culprit on the gallows God, and so on. Otherwise birth and death are not mysteries, nor is it any great mystery that a just man should be crucified, but that God should fascinate — with the interest of awe, of pity, of shame, of every harrowing feeling.

What Bridges sought in poetry, Hopkins argues, is present all along in theology: the answer is the most tantalising statement of the problem.

Only in the terrible sonnets, however, does Hopkins' acquaintance with mystery move beyond the level of theory. That is not a comfortable experience. Instead, theological mystery comes alive in terrifying guise to inhabit the soul of his poetry. His attempt to dictate his own terms in faith is shattered by a nameless wrestler at daybreak and his self-driven pursuit of the elective will is challenged by the mysterious divine darkness. Blithe discussions of Christian mystery are replaced by raw experience of paradox, where love is indistinguishable from cruelty and election from rejection, and his dear God lives (alas!) away. For the terrible sonnets take reader and poet-speaker to Golgotha and Gethsemane, the mysterious realm of Christian paradox where knowledge of God's loving presence is replaced by the bewildering experiences of his dark absence or perhaps even his hatred. In the process, the greatest mystery of all occurs, as the experience of the rejected believer is grafted onto that of the divine culprit on the gallows.

This is not what Hopkins considered poetry to involve, but he had little choice in the matter because the terrible sonnets emerge as a backlash to Hopkins' excessive scrupulosity. In Wales, his elective desire to glorify God could operate through his affective appreciation of the natural world, but in Liverpool, Glasgow, Bedford Leigh and especially Dublin, Hopkins was removed from the enlivening sources of affective

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<sup>18</sup> *To Bridges*, pp. 187-188 (24 October 1883).

stimulation and his apprehension of inscape ceased.<sup>19</sup> Thereafter, his elective will exercises almost total control over his poetic gift, though this comes at great personal cost. For in his feats of willpower, Hopkins risked "rejecting his true self",<sup>20</sup> his God-created self with its full range of emotions and poetic possibilities. McChesney warns that denying the affective will may in fact be denying the will of God:

This straining rigour which relies on naked will-power (the elective will) and rides rough-shod over desire, impulse and inclination (the affective will) is a distortion of true spirituality. . . . it can be lacerating and destructive to the personality. It can turn life into a savage and weary grind.<sup>21</sup>

So it proved, because this weariness became the depression that poured forth the unsolicited anguish of the terrible sonnets. The sonnets are "inspirations unbidden"<sup>22</sup> which he does not want because they do not fit within the elective will's carefully mastered agenda for the praise of God. Certainly, their obdurate report from the depths of despair shatters any expectations that religious poetry should be optimistically devotional. They are instead so taut, so highly pitched past the pitch of grief, that the reader feels them about to implode under the pressure of their own agony. A nineteenth century poet seeking to court the Muse could not have written so harrowingly. No wonder, then, that Hopkins doubts their provenance. Is it "hell's spell" or "dark heaven's baffling ban" which prevents the dissemination of the speaker's words ('To Scem the Stranger' (12-13))? Similarly, the "lionlimb" laid against the speaker in 'Carriion Comfort' could be either divine or diabolic, for scripture uses lion imagery to describe both Christ and the devil.<sup>23</sup> Such finely poised uncertainty reflects the fact that Hopkins is no longer in control. No longer does his poetry carefully order the inscapes of the world to affirm his praise of Christ in an organised accommodation of poetry to his conception of the priest's task. Rather, the terrible sonnets emerge from the pain of crushed vocation and bewilderment. They are echoes from the darkness where God's ways remain truly mystifying. Therefore, in ways he did not understand, they approach the deep and mysterious heart of Hopkins' priestly vocation.

In this light, commentators have regularly observed that the desolation of the sonnets mirrors the aridity described by the masters of the spiritual life. Hopkins knew in theory

<sup>19</sup> Harris, p. xiii; Miller pp. 353-358.

<sup>20</sup> Downes (1959), p. 135. Downes does not ultimately offer a negative criticism of Hopkins' decision, observing that "It is very hard to question Hopkins' judgment all along the line" (p. 136).

<sup>21</sup> McChesney, p. 147.

<sup>22</sup> *To Bridges*, p. 221 (1 September 1885).

<sup>23</sup> e.g. Revelation 5.5; 1 Peter 5.8; N.H. MacKenzie (1981), p. 175. According to Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (*Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 8),

that inscrutable mystery has always been part of Christian experience as it was part of Christ's experience. To understand this, Jesuits naturally look to the desolations described by St Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises*,<sup>24</sup> while the sonnets also show affinities with Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*,<sup>25</sup> and the writings of Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross.<sup>26</sup> Although some of these figures exercised specific influence on Hopkins, the experiences they describe are common amongst the practitioners of Christian spirituality. This is apparent when comparing the desolate experiences of the terrible sonnets with the desolations detailed by St John of the Cross in *The Dark Night*. There is no evidence that Hopkins read St John, whose work does not feature in the refectory reading list from Hopkins' time of training,<sup>27</sup> nor is he mentioned in any of Hopkins' surviving prose. Neither was Hopkins consciously pursuing the mystical path which is St John's major concern.<sup>28</sup> Yet Kavanaugh insists that St John's writings can apply to everyone seeking spiritual perfection, not just to contemplatives.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, the terrible sonnets describe experiences uncannily similar to those recounted in *The Dark Night*. These similarities confirm, even if Hopkins hardly knew it, that the dark mystery of those sonnets is theological rather than atheological and that their expressions of utter anguish are cries from the mysterious heart of theology, even, as R.S. Thomas says in his introduction to the *Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, that they "are but a human repetition of the cry from the Cross".<sup>30</sup>

It is too easy in reading the terrible sonnets to clutch at such descriptive labels as the "via negativa" and the "dark night of the soul" as if these labels somehow ameliorate the severity of the experiences concerned. This is not so, and Harris rightly condemns critics who do this.<sup>31</sup> Ong comments that, in both reality and in ascetical literature, the dark nights which the soul can undergo are "much worse" than appears from the bourgeois

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Petrarch used this last combination of images in a manner to argue for "the harmony of poetry and theology: 'When Christ is called now a 'lion,' and now a 'lamb,' and now a 'worm' — what is that if not poetic?'".

<sup>24</sup> As noted by, e.g. Downes (1959), p. 134; Pick, pp. 132-133.

<sup>25</sup> e.g. Downes (1959), pp. 138-145. Devlin in *Sermons*, p. 120; Pick, p. 133.

<sup>26</sup> Downes (1959), p. 131; Devlin in *Sermons*, pp. 117, 120; Pick, p. 133.

<sup>27</sup> Certainly, St John does not appear in the refectory reading listed in Appendix 2 in Alfred Thomas, pp. 214-245.

<sup>28</sup> As Pick insists, p. 131.

<sup>29</sup> *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, trans. and ed. by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1964), p. 49. This is contrary to the opinions of Humphry House who seeks to confine St John's comments to a "specialised life of contemplative prayer" — 'A Note on Hopkins' Religious Life', in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems. A Casebook*, ed. by Margaret Bottrall (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 109-112, (p. 111).

<sup>30</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Introduction to the *Penguin Book of Religious Verse*', p. 50.

<sup>31</sup> Harris, pp. 12-14. Compare MacKenzie (1990), p. 445; James Finn Cotter, *Inscape: the Christology and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), p. 221.

mysticism of Eliot's *Burnt Norton*,<sup>32</sup> and no doubt also from all criticism of Hopkins. Yet Ong's comments point to the fact that Harris' reading is reductive in its own way. For despite its horror, the dark night remains theological. God is not simply absent in the terrible sonnets, but everywhere present in baffling and disturbing ways. Labelling the sonnets as experiences of "the *via negativa*" should both stress their severity and remind the reader that the sonnets have an impeccable if perplexing theological pedigree. For theology has always, as Cunningham says, "dealt in the aporetic, the desert experience, the *via negativa*".<sup>33</sup> The territory of suffering is the territory of religion. The rawness of the suffering they contain led some of Hopkins' early critics to suggest that the sonnets represent an admission of vocational failure,<sup>34</sup> a supposition that Ong corrects on the grounds that these critics were "unfamiliar with Catholic asceticism". In fact, rather than indicating a "wavering faith", the depth of suffering in the terrible sonnets "signified unwavering faith".<sup>35</sup> For unwavering faith is not exempt from terrible affliction. *The Dark Night* describes unstintingly the severe trials with which God visits believers during the purgative stages on the route to perfection:

God darkens all this light [of the divine favour] and closes the door and the spring of the sweet spiritual water they were tasting as often as they desired.<sup>36</sup>

These words could be describing the difference between Hopkins' poems of exultation and desolation. In his *Journals*, he laments most people's unawareness that the beauty of inscape is waiting in nature to be instressed as often as desired.<sup>37</sup> In the terrible sonnets, however, the door has been closed on this gift of taste and vision. God does not allow the soul undergoing the dark night of the senses "to find sweetness or delight in anything",<sup>38</sup> a description which well fits the sonnets' restless aridity. Although they continually *seek* comfort and consolation,

I cast for comfort . . . ('My Own Heart', 5)

Comforter, where, where, is your comforting? ('No Worst', 3)

the comfort on offer is usually cold and carrion comfort: the carcass of Despair in 'Carrion Comfort' or the promise of sleep and death in 'No Worst'. Even the glimpses of real

<sup>32</sup> Ong, p. 147.

<sup>33</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *In the Reading Room: Postmodernity, Texts and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 402.

<sup>34</sup> e.g. I.A. Richards argues that Hopkins' asceticism meant that all his poems were in some sense "poems of defeat" (Bottrall, pp. 69-77, (p. 73)). John Middleton Murry writes of the "failure of [Hopkins'] whole achievement" owing to "the starvation of experience which his vocation imposed upon him" (*Aspects of Literature* (London: Collins, 1920), p. 60).

<sup>35</sup> Ong, p. 151.

<sup>36</sup> *The Dark Night*, Bk I, Ch. 8.3, p. 312.

<sup>37</sup> *Journals*, p. 221. Compare the regret in 'Hurrahing in Harvest' that "these things were here and but the beholder/Wanting" (11-12).

comfort in 'Patience' and 'My Own Heart' lie in an unrealised future. Patience comes, the speaker says, "those ways we know" (14), but it is not known in the poem's present. Similarly, although the speaker in 'My Own Heart' bids his Jackself to wait for the smile of God that "lights a lovely mile" (14), at the close of the poem he is still waiting

When St John moves from his discussion of sensory purgation (the dark night of the senses) to spiritual or contemplative purgation (the dark night of the soul), the parallels with the terrible sonnets become even clearer. In communicating their experiences of desolation, both writers employ images of combat, darkness and protracted time. Both describe feelings of abandonment and longings for death. Thus, according to St John, the soul suffering this purgation "knows that he loves God" but "he finds no relief" in this knowledge, only "deeper affliction":

For in loving God so intensely that nothing else gives him concern, and aware of his own misery, he is unable to believe that God loves him. He believes that he neither has nor ever will have within himself anything deserving of God's love, but rather every reason for being abhorred . . .<sup>39</sup>

'I Wake and Feel' captures this feeling in its speaker's deep love for "dearest him that lives alas! away" (8). The fact that God remains his "*dearest*", even though far away, gives this sonnet its desperate pathos. His desperate cries to the Holy Spirit and Mary in 'No Worst' are similarly charged with spurned affection:

Comforter, where, where is your comforting?  
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief? (3-4)

Yet as St John says, there is "no relief" in this situation, only the continual feeling of being abhorrent in God's sight, of being "gall" and "heartburn" ('I Wake and Feel' (9)). This feeling is, as St John writes, the "immersion of the mind in the knowledge and feeling of one's own miseries and evils".<sup>40</sup> It is the inescapable feeling that self-yeast of spirit has soured its own dough ('I Wake and Feel' (12)).

It is not quite right to say that the terrible sonnets offer no relief. As noted above, 'No Worst' offers one dreadful prospect:

Herel Creep,  
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all  
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep. (12-14)

If this is relief, it is relief of a particularly bleak variety, but again, St John reports that the soul undergoing purgation reacts similarly. Suffering under a weight of darkness akin to

<sup>38</sup> *The Dark Night*, Bk I, Ch. 9.2, p. 313

<sup>39</sup> *The Dark Night*, Bk II, Ch 7.7, p. 343.

<sup>40</sup> *The Dark Night*, Bk II, Ch 5.5, p. 336.



Thus the anguished desperation of the terrible sonnets find its home in the midst of spiritual experience. If the sonnets are not to be understood theologically, it is difficult to understand them at all. Their pathos comes, not simply from their record of depressed mental anguish, but from the parallel anguish at God's place in the experience. Hopkins' cries join with the age-long cries of saint and Psalmist, and also of Christ:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? (Psalm 22.1; Matthew 27.46).

How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me? (Psalm 13.1)

Mine eye mourneth by reason of affliction: LORD, I have called daily upon thee, I have stretched out my hands unto thee. (Psalm 88.9)

The scriptural tradition, as this sampling of verses shows, insists that life is "savagely marked by disequilibrium, incoherence, and unrelieved asymmetry".<sup>46</sup> Thus although St John forbears, perhaps out of pious reticence, to link his experiences with Christ's, Christian belief and practice in fact contain at their heart, in broken bread, spilt wine and desperate story, the cry from the cross. The cry of Hopkins' terrible sonnets in uncomprehending anguish at the absence of God and the pain of desolation is the cry of someone following Christ. Indeed, Hopkins knew that asking, as he had asked, to be "raised to a higher degree of grace" is in effect asking to be "lifted on a higher cross".<sup>47</sup> Thus Ong, contra Miller, insists that the sonnets take their place within an explicitly Christian awareness of suffering:

Everything Hopkins says and everything in his ascetical background suggests that Hopkins' point-blank thrust into the suffering self, far from being a threat to Christian faith that somehow made God 'disappear,' in fact provided an opportunity to know more deeply what the faith entailed and to embrace the faith's full consequences with a degree of explicit awareness unattainable before. . . . Self-confrontation is part of God's plan.<sup>48</sup>

God's plan, not Hopkins'. Hopkins was always clear about his own plan. He would strictly control his writing to write only that which served his religion and contributed to God's praise. Yet in fact, abandoning these personal notions and surrendering to the inspirations of the unbidden sonnets unleashed those paradoxes necessary for allowing a full identification with the way of Christ. "As [Hopkins] ceased to *try* to separate his ascetic morality from his poetic impulses, his poetry became flooded with the moral insight that twenty years" in the Society of Jesus had given him.<sup>49</sup> Once he ceased striving after a safe theological form, his poetry embodied something of the devastating *via negativa* which is

<sup>46</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), p. 51.

<sup>47</sup> *Sermons*, pp. 253-254 (Retreat Notes, 8-9 September 1883).

<sup>48</sup> Ong, p. 151.

the way to the cross. This does not disqualify the celebration of the earlier poems. Rather, by providing a new reality to the Hopkins corpus, the sonnets give a more complete coverage of the paradoxical range of Christian experience and theology. Outburst, anger and loneliness now sit, as they must, alongside assertions of incarnation and love. In the terrible sonnets, Hopkins finds himself, as Cunningham says of Karl Barth's confrontation with the cross, "in an aporia which comes from God".<sup>50</sup>

In the process, Hopkins is forced to confront some of his own potentially facile theology. Having proposed in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' that the divine purpose is accomplished even in death and destruction, he faces the implications of this in the terrible sonnets. It is easy enough to invite God, as 'The Deutschland' does, to "Make mercy in all of us, out of us all/Mastery" (79-80). Indeed, in 'The Deutschland', Hopkins almost lectures God to "Wring thy rebel, dogged in den,/Man's malice, with wrecking and storm". But as the spiritual masters insist, the implications of such a statement can be devastating. Describing God in explosive epithets ("lightning and love", "a winter and warm" (67-70)) makes good theory and good poetry, but these condensations risk becoming formulaic. For what can be colder than "God's cold" (129) or fiercer than his lightning? In the terrible sonnets, these formulae cease to be theory as Hopkins discovers that God's cold is freezing, his lightning devastating. In 'The Deutschland', the speaker requests the celestial blacksmith to forge his will in humanity with the fire of his "anvil-ding" (73-74). Yet as Mariani points out, a similar image is used in 'No Worst', where "the reality of [it] comes home to the poet".<sup>51</sup> He is not now the curious observer at the heavenly forge but the seared iron on the anvil. Having experienced the searing pain, he now knows the implications of suggesting that God wields his will as a blacksmith administers the wincing blows of the hammer:

My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief-  
Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing . . . (5-6)

With blood flowing freely from the pen's nib, the standard theological response (the experience represents God's winnowing work) is only carrion comfort. Yet there was no comfort to Christ on the cross, either. Perhaps the internal anguish of the crucified Christ informs the Christological tensions deeply rooted in the priestly identity. Downes comments that, upon becoming a Jesuit, Hopkins would thereafter "decipher his selfness

<sup>49</sup> Ellsberg, p. 40.

<sup>50</sup> Cunningham, p. 403.

<sup>51</sup> Mariani, p. 226.



in and through the Passion and Resurrection of Christ."<sup>52</sup> Whatever else this may mean, it surely means that Hopkins' commitment required him to model his whole life on Christ's supreme kenotic sacrifice.<sup>53</sup> That sacrifice, Hopkins believed, shows forth Christ's nature as it was before the foundation of the world.<sup>54</sup> In entering the priesthood, in his unwavering commitment to God<sup>55</sup> and in serving at the sacrifice of the Mass, he strove to follow Christ's sacrificial example all the way to the cross. Thus the terrible sonnets peculiarly extend Hopkins' willingness to be broken in all areas. They recollect to a later readership, as does the breaking and sharing of the eucharist, Christ's humility before God and his willingness to be broken. Kelly observes a similar liturgical process at work in 'The Deutschland', where, he argues, "the poet is the celebrant",

who offers through the vehicle of his hands, of his mind, a sacrifice of which the victim, other than he, is he also by participation. Hopkins is the priest of poetry; he is also the poet of the priesthood. The sufferings of shipwreck, terrible in words, profound in the feeling of the poem, are an offering, an oblation, and an oblation received.<sup>56</sup>

If these words apply to 'The Deutschland', they are supremely applicable to the terrible sonnets. There, the poet presents and recollects the costly sacrifice of himself which following Christ has exacted, which is in some sense also the priest's sacrifice of Christ. Thus Gardner suggests hesitantly that Hopkins in these poems becomes an "*alter Christus*";<sup>57</sup> while Loomis comments that the blood in which they were written<sup>58</sup> is, "finally not only his own, but also his Savior's".<sup>59</sup> Thus, Hopkins is acting as a poetic priest, sharing with his readers Christ's sufferings as they are acted out in himself. Remembering Hopkins' willingness to be raised on a higher cross, he is also offering the sufferings back to God. Shared with others, and offered to God, the terrible sonnets are thus an offering fully in accord with the sacrificial, eucharistic vocation of the Catholic priest.

<sup>52</sup> Downes (1996), p. 55. Compare Retreat Notes of 5 January 1889, "But our lives and in particular those of religious, as mine, are in their whole direction, not only inwardly but most visibly and outwardly, shaped by Christ's" (*Sermons*, p. 263).

<sup>53</sup> As Hopkins saw it, the quality of sacrifice defines the nature of godhead and "all Christ's actions" (*Sermons*, pp. 110, 197). Philippians 2.6ff on Christ's sacrifice was a key text to him (see *To Bridges*, p. 174 (3 February 1883)) and he insisted that it is a human responsibility "to contribute . . . to that sacrifice" which is "the end for which man was made" (*Sermons*, p. 129).

<sup>54</sup> See *Sermons*, pp. 95, 177 and Devlin's commentary on it at pp. 112ff.

<sup>55</sup> Most famously in his retreat notes of 1 January 1889: "I do not waver in my allegiance, I never have since my conversion to the Church" (*Sermons*, p. 261).

<sup>56</sup> Bernard Kelly, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', in Bottrall, pp. 117-125 (p. 119). Compare von Balthasar, vol. III, p. 399: "here the foundering and shattering of all worldly images and symbols yield a final picture of the sacrament of the world: perishing and ascending to God — death as Resurrection: Resurrection not beyond death, but in death. . . . Foundering in God . . . man finds nothing more to cling on to, not his longing nor reward nor Heaven nor any of God's attributes, for beyond all that there is nothing but him alone . . .".

<sup>57</sup> Gardner, vol 2, p. 339.

<sup>58</sup> "if ever anything was written in blood one of these was": *To Bridges*, p. 219, (17 May 1885)

<sup>59</sup> Loomis, p. 146. Loomis overstates the sonnets' hopefulness, but this point is valid.

Thus, although on one level the sonnets appear inimical to faith, they are true to the nature of the poet which as Hartman points out, is to be "both holy and profane".<sup>60</sup> The profanity of needless suffering, as seen in the profanity of a crucified God, can in fact become the moment of greatest holiness. For the peculiar hope of Christianity is that the bottom is not the bottom; that Christ presents "love at the height of suffering". Hopkins' suffering occurs within that hope and so "the antitheses of Hopkins' poetry point beyond themselves to the paradox of reticent unity", a unity glimpsed in the self-sacrificial, kenotic love of God-in-Christ.<sup>61</sup> Asking to be raised to a higher degree of grace is asking to be lifted on a higher cross. It is "through desolation and death to the ways of the will", writes Ellsberg, that Hopkins unwittingly achieves "a convening of the two vocations" and "the condition of 'immortal diamond'".<sup>62</sup> Ellsberg's quotation here is from 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection' a poem which is almost fey in its glimpse of the eventual material termination of all things. It is the vision of someone who has been frayed down to his last strands, who knows "how fast [Man's] fire-dint, his mark on mind is gone" (11), and who has foreseen the end of everything "in an enormous dark/Drowned" (12-13). This is the condition of the terrible sonnets and it seems to have become permanent. Yet allowing the terrible sonnets to be written is in fact Hopkins' first step towards redressing the imbalance imposed by the stringencies of the elective will. It is an admission that his own vision is only partial, that both despair and joy have a legitimate role in Christian experience. Lichtmann therefore argues that Hopkins' final poems display a "movement toward the paradox of a truly religious and not merely dialectical vision of reality".<sup>63</sup> In the climactic moment of the 'Heraclitean Fire', where the ludicrous paradox of the resurrection issues from the depths of despair, the poem declares in a flash of eschatological conviction what the eucharist also declares, that those depths are not the bottom:

Enough! 'The Resurrection,  
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, joyless days, dejection.  
Across my foundering deck shone  
A beacon, an eternal beam. Flesh fade, and mortal trash  
Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash:  
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and

<sup>60</sup> Hartman p. 3, quoted in Bernard Bergonzi, *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 179. Bergonzi argues that Hopkins manifests an unexpected "both/and" tendency, rather than a straight "either/or".

<sup>61</sup> Maria R. Lichtmann, *The Contemplative Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 210, 211.

<sup>62</sup> Ellsberg, p. 121.

<sup>63</sup> Lichtmann, p. 212.

'This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,  
Is immortal diamond. (16-24)

In this spectacular, firework statement of faith, the priest's sacrifice is finally identified consciously with Christ's. Hopkins shows himself finally and joyfully prepared to identify with Christ in suffering as well as in glory, to glimpse God's better beauty even at "the breaking point, [when] all that is dear is shed".<sup>64</sup> As a Jack and a joke, carrying the combustible matchwood material of his poems, he hands himself to God, only to receive back this poetic trumpet call which heralds the worth of the man, both priest and poet, in all his frailty and mortality. "[I]t has taken", Lichtmann writes, "the mining motions of the "terrible sonnets" to unearth the "immortal diamond"". <sup>65</sup> In his preparedness to shed his poetry, to leave his own solutions behind and to surrender fully to God's disposal, his poetry and his priesthood both come into their own:

Also in some med. today I earnestly asked our Lord to watch over my compositions . . . that he would have them as his own and employ or not employ them as he would see fit. And this I believe is heard . . . <sup>66</sup>

On finite terms, Harris rightly argues that the terrible sonnets' failure to speak to a congregation represents a failure of the priestly function.<sup>67</sup> Yet Hopkins' terms are not finite. The priest's sacrifice of himself was honoured; the poet's legacy preserved. Hopkins' poetry, his unwilling offering of the broken self, is taken up into the eucharistic pattern of Christ's suffering. It therefore acts eucharistically to proclaim the mystery of the cross. The priest's cup of suffering contains eternal life and the poet's agonised cries point to the trumpet crash of the resurrection. Balthasar comments that, "the poet of the cosmic rapture" must also be, "at the same time",

the poet . . . of the intimate dialogue between the lost sinner and the crucified Redeemer; as one who beholds he will be also the obedient believer, in the analogies he must always consider and express the reversals and the erasures.<sup>68</sup>

Eventually, after the reversals and erasures of the terrible sonnets, Hopkins' work does just that. By finally looking at life whole it sacramentally embodies to the reader the Christian paradoxes of sacrifice and joy. The "gall" in 'I Wake and Feel' becomes his poetic wine and the "dull dough" his priestly bread (9, 12) recollecting that the way of the eucharist is the way of suffering and the way of the cross.

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<sup>64</sup> Jasper (1985), p. 20.

<sup>65</sup> Lichtmann, p. 212.

<sup>66</sup> *Sermons*, pp. 253-254 (Retreat Notes, 8 September 1883).

<sup>67</sup> Harris, p. 129.

<sup>68</sup> von Balthasar, vol III, p.394.

*Herbert — the parson as teacher and guide*

In an age of uncertainty and doubt, therefore, the interaction of Hopkins' poetry and priesthood appeals finally to the Christian mysteries, recalling his role as the president over the paradoxes of the eucharist. What then of the Anglican Herbert in an age of faith? T.S. Eliot, writing of the Victorian era, but clearly with an eye to the seventeenth century, comments that:

When religion is in a flourishing state, when the whole mind of society is moderately healthy and in order, there is an easy and natural association between religion and art. Only when religion has been partly retired and confined . . . do we get 'religious art' and in due course 'aesthetic religion'.<sup>69</sup>

Hopkins and the Victorians laboured under this dissociation, which is complete by the time of R.S. Thomas. But Eliot's idealised assessment of seventeenth century literature generalises over profound obstacles to religious art. In Herbert, the association between "religion and art" is not "easy and natural", and not simply because of his own anguish. The Reformation revived Augustinian attitudes towards language and rhetoric, and bred a tendency to regard poetry as a frivolous distraction from more important questions of truth.<sup>70</sup> So, although the Bible contains Psalms and other religious poetry, Reformed reverence for scripture treated this poetry decidedly differently from other sacred poetry which it tended to regard as an intrusion on the divine field. The subsequent widespread aversion to spiritual verse meant that vilification often awaited authors of contemporary psalms and spiritual songs.<sup>71</sup> In *The Temple*, Herbert was opening his volume to potential opprobrium. It is therefore remarkable that, against prevailing attitudes, the profound spiritual verse he fashioned from his personal agony was applauded. He had, writes Clarke, "achieved the impossible, a genuinely sacred poetry".<sup>72</sup> His work changed "attitudes towards poetry in worship among even the most austere members of the Christian community".<sup>73</sup> Together with Donne, Herbert restored poetry to the Christian heritage.<sup>74</sup>

In part, Herbert's remarkable achievement comes through the inviting humility which characterises the tone of 'The Church'. Hopkins' sacramental example, in which the priest-poet takes on and mediates Christ's sufferings as his readers' priest, is not for the Reformed pastor. Instead, 'The Church' takes the priest's suffering and anguish to create a model of

<sup>69</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Arnold and Pater', in *Selected Essays*, pp. 431-443, (p. 440).

<sup>70</sup> Clarke, pp. 1-3 and throughout.

<sup>71</sup> Clarke, pp. 3-4, 176-177

<sup>72</sup> Clarke, p. 8.

<sup>73</sup> Clarke, p. 177.

<sup>74</sup> J.A.W. Bennett, *Poetry of the Passion: Studies in Twelve Centuries of English Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) pp. 149-150.

humble instruction. Brokenness and tears echo through 'The Church' from its opening lines until its end, expressing incomprehension at the speaker's sufferings, and insubordination against God and the theological strictures of his commitment. Ultimately, however, his work reconciles the tension between the religious will and the poetic imagination within the magisterial enfolding of God, using it, not for Hopkins' sacramental ends, but for pastoral purposes. Herbert's confidence in the over-arching sovereignty of God means that agriculture, artillery and astronomy can lead to God as much as anguish and angst. "There is but joy and grief", 'Affliction' (5) declares, "If either will convert us, we are thine" (13-14). Consequently, all human experiences, including collisions between theological conviction and the poetic imagination, are accommodated within the structural flow of 'The Church', as they are within the grace of God. Secure in his role as a priest, Herbert is freed up to range widely in his poetic exploration.

'The Church' acts, therefore, as a kind of poetic sermon. In *The Country Parson*, Herbert suggests that a parson's sermons should be illustrated from his personal victories over the "lusts and affections",<sup>75</sup> and this is what happens in 'The Church'. The priest-poet draws on his own experience to guide his readers through the oscillations of the spiritual life to the kingdom banquet. 'This is not to say that everything which happens to the speakers of 'The Church' has happened to Herbert, for he is extremely sophisticated in his use of poetic personae. But his poetic pastoral address draws on personal experiences (whether actual or imagined) which are then moulded by the shaping pattern of biblical narrative.<sup>76</sup> This pattern is set out in 'The Holy Scriptures' (2) where the speaker finds everyone's "destinie" in the glorious "constellations of the [scriptural] storie" (8, 4). The scriptures are a trustworthy astrological almanac, a "book of starres" which "lights to eternall blisse" (14). 'The Bunch of Grapes', similarly, finds every Christian's journey figured in the storie of the people of Israel (8-11), including their "murmurings", "joy" and "sorrow" (18, 21). The latitude of scriptural example allows Herbert to incorporate an amazing range of experience into his poetry. The result is a poetry which, as Shaw says, simultaneously dramatises doctrine and acts as confessional poetry.<sup>77</sup> The poems are therefore less scholastic statements of everlasting weight than poetic reports of faith-in-progress that

<sup>75</sup> *A Priest to the Temple*, Chapter XXXIII, 'The Parson's Library', p. 278.

<sup>76</sup> Barbara Leah Harman, *Costly Monuments: Representations of the Self in George Herbert's Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 175-176, 189; Clarke, p. 81.

<sup>77</sup> Shaw, p. 25.

track the regression and development of the speaker according to biblical models<sup>78</sup> and guide their readers on the path of faith.

To express this pattern of warfare and reconciliation with God, Herbert appropriates, more deliberately than Hopkins, the exasperation, celebration and bewilderment of the Psalms.<sup>79</sup> Martz comments that the "sighs and groans and tears of the afflicted lover" are the ground tone of both the Psalms and *The Temple*.<sup>80</sup> With this model, as Clarke notes, Herbert can engage with God, "in any psychological or rhetorical condition known to the Psalmist . . . including the rather rough waters of 'The Collar', and the anything-but-sweet rhetoric of 'Denial'".<sup>81</sup> This indebtedness to the Psalms confounds critics who argue that Herbert's lyrics succeed only in spite of their doctrinal background. Vendler for example considers that Herbert's poetry modifies the theology he inherits in the light of his experience.<sup>82</sup> But Strier rightly observes that it is impossible to "distinguish the "human" from the doctrinal content of Herbert's poetry", because no such distinction exists in Herbert's mind. Pointing to Luther's influence on Herbert, he argues that the human content of Herbert's poetry can be grasped "only through, not apart from, the theology".<sup>83</sup> Luther, by stressing the psychological nature of the individual's salvation, had placed human experience at the core of theology. Following Luther, therefore, Herbert "recognized and dramatized" the insight that the life of the believer is the litmus paper on which theological terms operate. "The more deeply we understand the theology of the poetry, the more deeply we understand its human content", Strier writes, because "The two are one".<sup>84</sup>

It is thus that Herbert can instruct his readers on the essentials of Christian faith out of his personal experience. Walton's report of how Herbert understood *The Temple* confirms this. Herbert apparently stated that his poems drew on "the many spiritual conflicts" that passed between his soul and God and hoped that they might help some "poor dejected soul".<sup>85</sup> His own journey to sanctification, provides a map for poor dejected pilgrims who come

<sup>78</sup> See, e.g. Chana Bloch's discussion of 'The Bunch of Grapes' in *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 141-146.

<sup>79</sup> Bloch, Ch. 5.

<sup>80</sup> Martz, p. 280. Compare also Bloch's summary of Herbert's debt to the Psalms (Chapter 5); Clarke, p. 129.

<sup>81</sup> Clarke, p. 128.

<sup>82</sup> Vendler, p. 206, where she talks about "Jesus' self-definition as Herbert", or "the God Herbert created in his own best self-image" (275). Herbert's effort *has*, as she says, "been to make intimacy from dogma" (206), but only because his own intimate relationship depends on friendship with the God-made-man. See the next chapter.

<sup>83</sup> Strier (1983), p. xxi.

<sup>84</sup> Strier (1983), p. xxi.

<sup>85</sup> Walton, p. 311.

after him. From this experiential platform, the learned Cambridge University Orator can write scathingly of a purely academic approach to theology. 'Divinitie' begins by outlining contemporary astronomical theory, stressing that the *theory* of the spheres is a human construct which makes no difference to the actual conduct of the stars. From these principles, 'Divinitie' attacks the academic theologians:

Just so the other heav'n they also serve,  
Divinities transcendent skie:  
Which with the edge of wit they cut and carve.  
Reason triumphs, and faith lies by. (5-8)

Christ, the speaker insists, did not thicken the simplicity of God's saving love with "definitions", "curious questions and divisions" (10, 12). Instead, he simply bids his followers to "take his blood for wine" (21) and his teaching is utterly practical: "*Love God, and love your neighbour. Watch and pray./Do as you would be done unto*" (17-18). The involved disputations of academic theology, comparable to the spheres and epicycles of astronomy, are, as seen above, discarded for the guiding example of that "book of statutes" which leads "to eternall blisse" ('The Holy Scriptures' (2), line 14). Faith is not to be lived by the vain pursuit of academic knowledge, because,

Faith needs no staff of flesh, but stoutly can  
To heav'n alone both go, and leade. (27-28)

Good honest faith, personified as the stout and robust hiker, climbs to heaven unaided by human accoutrements, but guided rather, as 'The Holy Scriptures' says, by the stars of scripture. Of course, the route heavenwards is still difficult and experience often dissuades from continuing the journey, as the allegory of 'The Pilgrimage' suggests. Rest and joy are constantly deferred in this life and on the basis of present experience, the pilgrim's question "Can both the way and end be tears?" (28) must be answered "yes". Only by faith and the example of others, especially in scripture, can the route to "the gladsome hill" of hope (19) be discovered, and the tears of grief become tears of joy.

Indeed, as the wrestlings of 'The Church' show, experience untempered by the guiding Christian story is readily hijacked by the rebellious, poetic will. As in Hopkins, outright unbelief is inconceivable, yet the weight of suffering does lead the speaker to contemplate insurrection. Thus the 'Affliction' poems (and others which could bear this title) struggle to reconcile the speaker's conviction of God's ultimate care with his variegated experiences of grief and joy. 'Affliction' (1) recounts the false dawn of joy which attended the speaker's responses to God's initial enticements, before switching to complain of the sorrow which now twists and grows through his life. The tide of bitterness towards God swells during

the poem as he complains of his decaying health, particularly because this prevents him from serving God. This frustrated purpose leads him to contemplate abandoning the rigours of God's service, and so he casually announces his intention to resign:

Well, I will change the service, and go seek  
Some other master out. (63-64)

Harman comments that this intention represents a desire for simple coherence, away from the perplexing vagaries which attend God's service.<sup>86</sup> Certainly, the story of those serving God seems to be always bound up with grief. Yet because the speaker knows this, he knows also that the prospect of insurrection against God's stern dealings is impossible. As the other 'Affliction' poems make clear, Christ's servants know that they serve the king of grief. So 'Affliction' (1) ends by admitting the impossibility for the speaker of living outside God's strange love:

Ah my deare God! though I am cleane forgot,  
Let me not love thee, if I love thee not. (65-66)

Whatever trials the speaker goes through, God remains "deare" to his follower. True love requires utter devotion, attended though it be by inevitable exasperation.<sup>87</sup> The complexity of the double negatives suggests that following Christ will always involve intractable unpredictability,<sup>88</sup> and all his followers can do is to remain faithful.

This the speaker does in each of the remaining 'Affliction' poems, most vividly during the staggering rhythms of 'Affliction' (4). There, despite suffering a "case of knives" (7) in his mind and experiencing the utter fragmentation of his world, he continues to beg for God's relief ("Oh help, my God!" (19)), trusting absolutely that God's grace can restore him to some sort of coherent position. Only 'Affliction' (5), a poem of altogether different mood, downplays the speaker's grief and replaces the urgent yearning after divine favour with a retrospective reflection on the necessity of God's cleansing afflictions. Approximately halfway through 'The Church', this last 'Affliction' poem projects a humble acceptance of suffering, describing believers as trees, battered by God's "blustering windes", "whom shaking fastens more" (20-21). Like the chaff metaphor in 'Carrion Comfort', its welcome to affliction is a hard saying. It may even represent Herbert's final position, but within 'The Church', it is but one pole in the vacillation between poetic insubordination and spiritual devotion. Because of these extremes, Herbert's spiritual poetry of suffering commitment avoids mawkish glibness but also despair.

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<sup>86</sup> Harman, p. 100.

<sup>87</sup> Singleton, pp. 124-135.

<sup>88</sup> Harman, p. 101



'This poetic integrity is also partly attributable to the 'Affliction' poems' repeated reflection on God's involvement with suffering in the cross. 'Affliction' (1) uses imagery from the game of bowls to declare that God's actions "crosse-bias" its speaker (53). This image suggests that although God's action sets the speaker infuriatingly off track, God has already travelled the new track in the cross. The final stanza of 'Affliction' (3) suggests that Christ faces the cross daily in the sufferings of the faithful, while 'Affliction' (2) views Christ's crucifixion as an advance payment that outweighs the speaker's future agony (15). Herbert's readiness to view his personal sufferings from the cross gives his poetry a perspective which distinguishes it from that of Hopkins and Thomas. Herbert's suffering is real, but he is convinced that the horizontal and temporal beam of his earthly agonies is met by the vertical beam of Christ's involvement to form a cross-like balance. This is clear in 'The Crosse', which could also have been named 'Affliction' (6). It sustains the idea that God is personally at work in his followers' suffering. Thus as Clarke observes, even the speaker's reproval of God in this poem forms part of the discourse of mortification. Obsessed with his own will and his own "designe" (6), Herbert's speaker must be reduced to God's will.<sup>89</sup> In the process, he discovers that God has experienced these sufferings before him, for the "crosse actions", "contrarieties" and "contradictions" of his experience are, he discovers at the poem's end, "properly a crosse felt by" Christ (32-35). Thus:

The poet's will is "crossed": it is thwarted; it is confronted with the cross of Christ, who more fully faced the "contradictions" . . . and who anticipated the poet's own suffering;<sup>90</sup>

The poet works to this conclusion from the beginning, even if the speaker only discovers it at the end. The poem is not left uncertainly poised as is, say, 'I Wake and Feel'. Nor does it abandon the notion of a personal God as does Thomas' poem 'At It', where the speaker imagines that, at the judgement, his eloquent and Job-like reproof of God for the world's suffering (14-16) will be met only by "the verdict/of [God's] calculations", which form an "abstruse/geometry" proceeding "eternally/in the silence beyond right and wrong" (17-20). Herbert would not recognise this, because whether in submission or rage, he conceives of God only as personal and always attentive to his complaints. Thus 'The Crosse' concludes with him crawling under the shadow of Christ's cross and appropriating Christ's words of resignation to God's will (words which he now calls "my words"): "*Thy will be done*" (36). Christ spoke these words during his unmatched anguish in Gethsemane (Matthew 26.42), yet through the aptness of both the end rhyme ("Son/done") and the

<sup>89</sup> Clarke, p. 216.

<sup>90</sup> Veith, p. 148.



only to the "Lord". For God's "calling", both salvific and vocational, is inescapable. The controlling pattern of the poem is revealed to be "sacramental and biblical",<sup>94</sup> for the unregenerate rebel's insolent words are actually loaded with "sacramental meanings". The "harvest" of a "thorn" which appears to harm him (7-9) is in fact "a thorn of Christ's crown" and Christ's blood "is the restorative "cordial fruit.""<sup>95</sup> Similarly, "The 'board' of line 1 is the communion table (God's board), 'free as the rood' suggests free as the Cross (rood), and the wine and corn . . . clearly bear eucharistic meaning."<sup>96</sup> These hidden meanings convey the fact that the speaker's perspective is distorted. For although, as Hart says, "he *thinks* he desires natural pleasure . . . the real object of his desire is supernatural, the cordial fruit of the Eucharist".<sup>97</sup> On all sides, the "larger vision" of scripture and sacrament "finally surrounds and claims him."<sup>98</sup> Of course, this vision does not end vulnerability and uncertainty,<sup>99</sup> but ultimately, even rebellion born of suffering and grievance leads back to God's paths.

Not only suffering and grievance, either. *The Temple*, like the psalter, records a full gamut of emotions.<sup>100</sup> God's providential operations are visible in poems of thanksgiving and joy as well as poems of rebellion and affliction. These "fluctuations between sorrow and joy", as Summers calls them, suggest Herbert's "understanding of the 'giddy' state of man" rather than any strictly organised progression.<sup>101</sup> Yet the oscillations of the giddy state have something important to teach humanity. Strier, commenting on the pattern of shrivelling and recovery the speaker undergoes in 'The Flower', insists that the poem is not simply about spiritual ephemerality, but also teaches the necessity of perspective:

God puts man through the fluctuations and pressures of immediate emotional experience in order to provide him with the possibility of attaining a perspective on this experience, of not being at the mercy of its phenomenological absoluteness.<sup>102</sup>

These cycles are part of a continual learning process in which humans must be taught to "spell" according to God's word (21) and to learn that "we are but flowers that glide" through cycles (44). Thus Fish discerns in "The Church" a "never-ending process of self-

<sup>94</sup> Harman, p. 80. Compare Luke 16.20.

<sup>95</sup> Harman, p. 79.

<sup>96</sup> Harman, p. 79.

<sup>97</sup> Jeffrey Hart, 'Herbert's The Collar Re-Read', in *Seventeenth Century English Poetry: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. by William R. Keast, revd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1971) 248-256 (p. 252).

<sup>98</sup> Harman, p. 80.

<sup>99</sup> Harman, p. 88, although Shaw points out (p. 114, n. 38) that Herbert is certain about his salvation.

<sup>100</sup> Compare Bloch, pp. 231ff. Bloch even proposes that the unpredictable order of 'The Church' poems reflects the order of the Psalms (p. 240).

<sup>101</sup> Summers, p. 87.

<sup>102</sup> Strier, p. 251.

examination" in which the sinful speaker learns continually to bring his contrite heart before God in this way.<sup>103</sup> As he learns to spell God's way, the poet's poetry becomes a pastoral text-book in which he teaches his readers God's language. Behind Herbert the learner in 'The Church' stands Herbert the teacher, catechising his readers on the Christian way.<sup>104</sup> That way points to 'Love' (3), the conclusion of the learning process when the pilgrimage will be over and the banquet served. 'Love' (3) thus casts a consummative light over the whole of 'The Church' as the eucharistic end of the priest-poet's teaching. He has been calling his readers throughout to the "feast" of the eucharist, the strengthening refreshment that "mends in length",<sup>105</sup> "perfumes" the heart, and combats "sinnes force and art".<sup>106</sup> The stress here is on the sanctifying grace that comes with the eucharist. Yet the priest-poet does not issue this sacramental invitation as an aloof sacerdotal channel for God's grace, but as a pastor-guide who has found nourishment in the eucharist and now seeks to lead others on the Christian way. Come people: Aaron is taught and dressed and now offers his experiences as teaching material for anyone who wishes to travel with him.

Herbert's sufferings are thus vital to his teaching role. Like St Paul in 2 Corinthians 3.6, his afflictions are for "the consolation and salvation" of those who learn from him. Herbert uses himself, Page says, "as his own metaphor".<sup>107</sup> As Chapter Two argued, Herbert's conception of the priesthood does not exalt the person of the priest above the members of his congregation. Although their parson, his poetry presents him as a fellow pilgrim struggling with his faith and willing to help other strugglers by sharing his experiences with them. In his poetry, he meets the brief which Herbert sets the parson in *The Country Parson* (part of which was quoted above):

... the Parson having studied, and mastered all his lusts and affections within . . . hath ever so many sermons ready penn'd, as he hath victories. And it fares in this as it doth in Physick: He that hath been sick of a Consumption, and knows what recovered him, is a Physitian so far as he meetes with the same disease, and temper; and can much better, and particularly do it, then he that is generally learned, and was never sick.<sup>108</sup>

'Affliction' (1) to (5), 'Longing', 'Home', 'The Crosse', 'Gratefulness': these poems show the poet as the spiritual "Physitian" whose experience enables him to fulfil the priest's

<sup>103</sup> Fish (1978), pp. 124-125. Compare Singleton's argument that *The Temple* records a repeated process of "mending and making" (p. 11).

<sup>104</sup> Fish (1978), throughout, especially p. 167.

<sup>105</sup> Partridge, p. 164 and Louis L. Martz, *The Oxford Authors: George Herbert and Henry Vaughan*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 469 gloss this line as "improves as it continues" and "progresses". There are presumably also connotations of healing in "mends".

<sup>106</sup> 'The Call' (7), 'The Banquet' (24), 'The Holy Communion' (12). Many other instances could be cited.

<sup>107</sup> Nick Page, *George Herbert: A Portrait* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch Publications, 1993), p. 129.

<sup>108</sup> *A Priest to the Temple*, Chapter XXXIII, 'The Parson's Library', p. 278.

duties by being a pastor and teacher. "[H]e first preacheth to himselfe, and then to others",<sup>109</sup> as *The Country Parson* says. With humility gained through suffering, the speaker of *The Temple* guides his readers, as he must have guided his parishioners, through the extremes of the Christian life. Vendler comments that Herbert's poems "do not 'resolve' [their] extremes into one attitude; rather they permit successive and often mutually contradictory expressions of the self as it explores the truth of feeling".<sup>110</sup> This is true as far as it goes, but Herbert is not really interested in "the truth of feeling" for its own sake, but for the guidance, sanctification and ultimate healing of the faithful. This healing is ultimately a matter for Christ, the divine healer, but before then, the priest-poet enables his people to glimpse it in the eucharist, encouraging and teaching them on the way.<sup>111</sup> Again, therefore, the pastor's model is Christ, the "great shepherd of the sheep" (Hebrews 13.20), who, as "The Crosse" and "Affliction" poems show, understands our sufferings, because he himself is "touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Hebrews 4.15).

Thus, it is as a teacher and pastor that Herbert's final communication to Nicholas Ferrar about the publication of *The Temple* makes sense. As already seen, Ferrar was only to "let it be made public" if it would turn "to the advantage of any dejected poor soul".<sup>112</sup> Otherwise, it was to be burned. The pastor's task of exhorting and teaching (1 Timothy 4.13) remains Herbert's concern to the end of *The Temple* and the end of his life. Perhaps criticism should cease here before it turns into hagiography, but Singleton is surely right to insist that it is "the exemplary model of its author's life, not alone the persuasive power of his poetry, the truth of his vision, or the value of his precepts, which commends the work to its readers."<sup>113</sup> As Clarke insists, this attitude strongly downplays the importance of poetry,<sup>114</sup> but Herbert would have few qualms about that. He is interested not in his own status as poet, but in leading his readers towards sanctity, through sermon, catechism and poetry.

By recording Herbert's own allegedly disinterested attitude towards poetry as poetry, Walton helped sustain the tradition of the saintly Herbert whose poetry was admitted more

<sup>109</sup> *A Priest to the Temple*, Ch. XXXIII, p. 279.

<sup>110</sup> Vendler, p. 56.

<sup>111</sup> Clarke, p. 148, cites a contemporary preacher who argued that the poetic qualities of the biblical psalms contained the power to heal every state of mind.

<sup>112</sup> Walton, p. 311.

<sup>113</sup> Singleton, p. 18.

<sup>114</sup> Clarke, p. 280.

than read.<sup>115</sup> This ensured the positive reception of his poems and rescued *The Temple* from the seventeenth century disregard for sacred verse.<sup>116</sup> Yet treating Herbert in this way actually obscures both his priestly and his poetic value. Excavating through the saintly biography to the irritable, irritated texture of the poems uncovers a truly human poet whose humanity equips him ideally for the priest's pastoral role. The poems' oscillating emotions bespeak a priest-poet equipped to lead others on the road to paradise; a saint because of his unsaintliness; a leader who knows rebellion and wants to lift people out of ditches, because he has been in ditches himself.<sup>117</sup>

### *Thomas — the fiery tones of the prophet*

Perhaps because he is following in Hopkins' wake, Thomas is fully aware of the charge that his vocations are incompatible. But he defends himself vigorously against this charge, attributing it to "certain fundamental misunderstandings . . . endemic in our secular society."<sup>118</sup> This quotation comes from the essay cited in Chapter Three where Thomas defends his religious commitment by arguing that great art requires a religious framework. He takes a similar tone elsewhere when arguing that religion and poetry are related in purpose:

The nearest we approach to God, [Coleridge] appears to say, is as creative beings. The poet by echoing the primary imagination, recreates. Through his work he forces those who read him to do the same, thus bringing them nearer the primary imagination themselves, and so, in a way, nearer to the actual being of God as displayed in action.<sup>119</sup>

Poet and priest, therefore, have the same end in view, for the two things which best give "the unifying power of the imagination" are "poetry and religion".<sup>120</sup> Thus Thomas' allies in his prose defences of his religious vision are poets. 'Where Do We Go From Here?' takes aces gleaned from poets (Blake, Francis Thompson, Eliot and Wordsworth) and biblical allusions ("to one person, God may reveal himself as a loving shepherd leading to green pastures; to another as a consuming fire") as its signposts to transcendence.<sup>121</sup> The poets (a variable and unlikely selection, admittedly) confirm Thomas in his theism:

<sup>115</sup> C.A. Patrides documents trends in the reading of Herbert's poetry in his introduction to *George Herbert: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 1-36.

<sup>116</sup> Clarke, p. 38.

<sup>117</sup> Compare *A Priest to the Temple*, Ch. XXI, 'The Parson Catechizing', p. 257.

<sup>118</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'A Frame for Poetry', p. 70.

<sup>119</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*', p. 48.

<sup>120</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*', p. 48. Equating poetry and priesthood so closely involves some redefinition of Christianity and the priest's duty to fit Thomas' terms: "poetry is religion, religion is poetry . . . and I feel perfectly within my rights in approaching my whole vocation as priest and preacher as one who is to present poetry. . ." — Ormond, p. 53.

<sup>121</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Where Do We Go From Here?', in *R.S. Thomas: Selected Prose*, pp. 119-121 (p. 120), quoting from Psalm 23 and Hebrews 12.29.

'You believe,  
 then?'  
 'The poems  
 are witness. . .'  
 ('The Prisoner' 30-33)

This defence of theism, or perhaps fideism, is very different from Herbert's settled faith in revelation. Admittedly, like Herbert, Thomas considers the Psalms the place "to turn to have our feelings eloquently expressed for us in our own attempts to find God and glorify him".<sup>122</sup> But Herbert would surely have expressed this by saying that God finds us before "our own attempts" find him.<sup>123</sup> This is a key difference between Thomas and Herbert. Faithful though he is to the pastoral task, Thomas does not share Herbert's confidence that the parson is working with a Christ actively on the look-out for his sheep. Even if the people were pliable to his shepherding, Thomas' Romantic tendencies make the bearings of his own faith contingent and uncertain:

. . . For some  
 it is all darkness; for me too  
 it is dark . . .  
 ('Groping', 12-14)

Yet if Thomas cannot follow Herbert, neither does he undergo the terrible sonnets' hellish descent to Gethsemane. The suffering in his poetry is mostly external to himself and it elicits neither Hopkins' sacramental nor Herbert's exemplary response. Partly, his difficulty in finding a common outlet for his religious and poetic roles is an adjunct of living in the twentieth century. Thomas' fellow Welshman, David Jones, warns that twentieth century conditions are unpropitious for producing art "congenial to [the Church's] liturgical forms".<sup>124</sup> Still, Jones ponders whether "Individuals of this or that perception or vision . . . may locally and in a tentative and fluid manner make the desert blossom".<sup>125</sup> Thomas rarely makes the desert blossom, but he does enter the desert as a voice crying out from the wilderness in the bleak and uncompromising tradition of the prophet. This voice is awkwardly poised between his Romantic and Christian sympathies, yet as a poet, nonetheless, Thomas' vocations find common ground in response to suffering.

One of the most striking differences between Thomas and his predecessors, Hopkins and Herbert, is the impersonality of his poetic voice. Although his poems often feature a first person speaker, this voice handles its utterances "as objectively as possible", with the

<sup>122</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Foreword' to *The Psalms: Ancient Poetry of the Spirit* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1997), p. 7.

<sup>123</sup> Compare 'Holy Baptism' (1).

<sup>124</sup> David Jones, 'Religion and the Muses', in *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings by David Jones*, ed. by Harman Grisewood (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), pp. 97-106, (p. 103).

<sup>125</sup> Jones (1959), p. 105.

emotions "always under control".<sup>126</sup> Thomas' poetry rarely contains the personal note of Hopkins' work nor even the various dramatic personae who inform Herbert's poetry with emotion. Unlike Herbert and Hopkins, Thomas rarely writes from personal experiences of suffering, but instead speaks prophetically about the anguish of the species. His poetry's attention to suffering begins with "the inner tensions of the people he knows best",<sup>127</sup> his weather-beaten parishioners from rural Wales. Their pitiable condition makes him aware of the sorrowful mortality at the heart of the human condition, "the blood's stain" that lies at the roots of existence ('Song for Gwydion' (8)). Because this grim pain is universal, so the poet makes the individual experiences of Prytherch, Llywarch, Evans and Twm speak for all humankind. In 'The Dark Well', for example, Prytherch's hands have "bruised themselves on the locked doors/Of life" (13-14) and his heart, full of "gulped tears", is

... the dark well  
From which to draw, drop after drop,  
The terrible poetry of his kind. (15-17)

Perhaps with memories of the cup of suffering in Gethsemane, this strange well yields its poetic liquid drop by drop. Its reservoir of elemental and raw suffering informs Thomas' early poetry.

Over time, Thomas' poetry moves beyond the Welsh hillsides, but the numbing suffering discovered there infects the entire world. 'Petition' places its speaker in pastoral guise as he quietly pleads with "the disposer of the issues of life", "that truth should defer/'To beauty" (15-17). Behind the restrained, almost unemotional language, waves of present participles mount to form a liturgy of resentment that confirms the speaker's sense of life's injustice:

... I am eyes  
Merely, witnessing virtue's  
Defeat; seeing the young born  
Fair, knowing the cancer  
Awaits them. (10-14)

These reserves of pity, grief and anger boil over in the crisp understatement of the poem's final sentence which reports the answer to the speaker's petition that beauty should prevail:

... It was not granted. (17)

Since the petition goes unanswered the procession of theft, murder and rape continue. Despite the relative indirectness of the poetic voice, these experiences of suffering come clearly from the priest's past experiences which are then transmuted into poetic cries of

<sup>126</sup> Marie-Thérèse Castay, 'The Self and the Other: the Autobiographical Element in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas', in *The Page's Drift*, pp. 119-147, (p. 119).

<sup>127</sup> A.E. Dyson, *Yeats, Eliot and R.S. Thomas: Riding the Echo* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1981), p. 297.



sadness and anger. In a curious way, these poetic cries, like those in 'They' and 'There', represent Thomas' poetry at its most priestly. For the poet storms at God on behalf of the people in a vicarious way and so is priestly in the hieratic sense of the word. The anger which attaches to his complaint represents all humanity's anger so that he hopes, as he has admitted, that such poems "speak for more men than simply himself". This leads Gough to comment that his poems "are carried to God in anger — and in anguish on behalf of a suffering mankind".<sup>128</sup> Almost like an Old Testament priest, he stands between humanity and God, presenting humankind's suffering to heaven. In offering the people's complaints to God, his poems are sacrifices that join the psalmist in crying, How long, O Lord, how long?<sup>129</sup>

Yet the main target of Thomas' ire is not God but the increasing hold of materialism over contemporary society. He attacks the loss of connection between people and their land, and bewails the corresponding decline in spirituality. Here supremely, as Gough writes, the poet stands "in the role of prophet",

... pointing man back to the right values, opposing the secularisation of outlook brought on by science, teaching the purpose of life and representing God to man . . . Only in verse, he claims, is an 'aggression of fact/to be resisted successfully'<sup>130</sup>

Although less programmatically than Gough indicates, Thomas does respond to the suffering of the world in a poetry of prophetic declamation and proclamation. Like an Old Testament prophet inveighing against the moral and spiritual corruption around him, Thomas launches prophetic poetic explosions against the complacent malaise of society.<sup>131</sup> Something of his own understanding of this prophetic role emerges in 'Thus', a poem whose title evokes the words which preface much biblical prophecy: "Thus saith the Lord":

Whatever you imagine  
has happened. No words  
are unspoken, no actions  
undone: wine poisoned

in the chalice, the corpses  
raped. While Isaiah's  
angel hither and thither  
flies with his hot coal.

<sup>128</sup> Gough, p. 225. She quotes in poetic support of this *Echoes*, p. 75, where the old man fits "a bent/poem to his broken bow". Allchin quotes Raymond Pannikar who writes that "When he is at prayer, man . . . is performing a priestly action in the name of the whole of reality" (A.M. Allchin, 'Emerging: A Look at Some of R.S. Thomas' More Recent Poems', in *Critical Writings on R.S. Thomas*, ed. by Sandra Anstey, revd edn (Bridgend: Seren, 1992), pp. 100-111 (p. 107)).

<sup>129</sup> e.g. Psalms 6.3, 13.1, 74.10, 89.46, 90.13.

<sup>130</sup> Gough, p. 374, citing as examples 'Postscript', 'A Poet' and 'Adagio'.

<sup>131</sup> In 'Neb', Thomas tells of his sermons at Aberdaron, attacking the dogmas of "the over-simple presentation of science and technology . . . seeking to counteract their injurious influence on the majority of people" (R.S. Thomas, 'Neb', p. 85).

This recital of the violent and degrading acts which infect human life is familiar from 'Petition' or 'The Dark Well'. Here, however, the poem's apparently unemotive surface reveals a manifesto for a poetry of prophetic anger. In Isaiah 6.7, the seraph purifies Isaiah for his prophetic vocation by touching his lips with a live coal from the altar. By borrowing this motif here, Thomas suggests that the cruel acts of the blind hand require the urgency of a prophetic response. He will take the prophet's mantle to oppose the age-old devastation. The poisoned chalice and defiled corpses indicate that sacrilege, broadly understood, is his particular concern. For Thomas, this seems to mean that wherever humanity and spirituality are threatened, he will call people to account, challenging materialist assumptions and obsessive acquisition. He will berate society for seeking comfort and ease rather than virtue and condemn its failure to wrestle with questions of the spirit.

Even the earliest peasant poetry contains something of this declamatory challenge. By prizing the peasant lifestyle's alliance with earth against the ravages of technology, such poetry challenges unthinking stereotypes about rural life. Asking the "gaunt question" (20) posed by the farmer in the poem 'Iago Prytherch'<sup>132</sup> is in a way a prophetic rebuke to the wisdom of the "meritocrat". His mysteriousness is the

... most inconvenient and embarrassing of attributes in a society which is moving too rapidly to ever stop and concern itself with mystery. But [mystery] is the essence of Thomas's most fundamental alternatives. It is the alternative of the priest and the poet...<sup>133</sup>

'Gone?', similarly, looks back in despair on Prytherch's habitat, despoiled by an invasion of "inane/music", "aerials", "grins and smiles" (7, 12-13). The vacancy and the muck have been buried under capitalist exchange, so that the poem laments the vanishing of wildness, mystery and savage places, "bare ground, black thorns and the sky's emptiness" (21). These are necessary for Prytherch's survival, perhaps even for humanity's survival, for gaps, chasms, desert places and silences are often associated in Thomas' poetry with the quest for God.

Thomas' poetic attack on those who anaesthetise the mysterious places in human existence are numerous.<sup>134</sup> In keeping with the ferocious tones of the prophet, the attacks on the

<sup>132</sup> 'Iago Prytherch' from *Poetry for Supper*, p. 36: "Iago Prytherch, forgive my naming you..."

<sup>133</sup> Robert Nisbet, 'R.S. Thomas: the Landscape of Near Despair', in *Miraculous Simplicity*, pp. 102-109, (pp. 108-109).

dehumanising influence of the machine are often eschatological. As was clear in the previous chapter, dependence on the machine divests the human race of everything worthwhile it has<sup>135</sup> — spirituality, poetry and belief in God — and Thomas is tireless in his prophetic castigation of the race's willingness to subscribe to this new slavery. At its fiercest, 'Thomas' apocalyptic vision warns of a future where technological advance has perpetuated war, diluted virtue, extinguished natural beauty and annihilated faith. This is the utter inversion of the ideal poetic and spiritual future imagined in such poems as 'A Country' and discussed in the previous chapter. 'Digest' opens in a time when wars are layered upon other wars, the purpose of which is the cynically pragmatic and circular "justification/Of the surrender of values" for which previous wars had been fought (2-4). As part of its reliance on technology, humanity refuses to take any blame for this vicious cycle, laying responsibility instead at the door of the machine. As one war leads to the planning of the next, the warring sides are

... exempted  
From compact by the machine's  
Exigencies. (6-8)

The demands of the machine enable disingenuous humanity to disavow responsibility for ceaseless warfare.<sup>136</sup> Humanity attempts to justify the machine on the grounds that, because of it, the "labour of the years" is now over, but this sounds like misleading Stalinist rhetoric. For the poet is attracted to Prytherch and his kind largely because of their labour.<sup>137</sup> When 'Digest' reports that the children of this machine age are "heirs to an instant existence" (16-18), something is drastically amiss, because other poems insist that "it takes time/To prepare a sacrifice/For the God" ('No Answer', 8-10). But the world of 'Digest' is godless. There, silence is "out of date", and the spirit subject to a strictly revised "code" (8-11). Glutted on a surfeit of knowledge, humanity has become impotent:

They fed the machine  
Their questions, knowing the answers  
Already, unable to apply them. (18-20)

This is where alliance with the machine leads: to the annihilation of mystery and to knowledge without wisdom, depth or happiness. It is a new human slavery. Where the

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<sup>134</sup> Compare, among many others not discussed here, 'Cynddylan on a Tractor' (where the allusions to medieval Welsh literature lament "the devastation inflicted on the kingdom of Powys and the ruin of a whole culture" — R.S. Thomas, 'Neb', p. 53 and Davies' note at p. 181), 'No Through Road', 'Fuel'.

<sup>135</sup> Compare 'Fuel', where the price the machines demand from humanity for their services is "the alloy in/the thought that we can do without them." (7-8).

<sup>136</sup> Echoes, perhaps, of nuclear deterrents, arms races and Star Wars defence programmes. Thomas is a pacifist (see 'Neb', p. 44) and was an active member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (see Wintle, p. 283).

<sup>137</sup> See especially 'Truth' or 'Memories'.

service of God is perfect freedom, "the service of the machine is perfect enslavement",<sup>138</sup> The prophet has spoken.

Nothing in 'Digest' is peculiar to the future and it could easily be a prophetic denouncement of the poet's age. But 'Eschatology', published twenty years later, looks more definitely forward, and repeats the same denunciation, for nothing has changed. Militarisation continues apace. Humans talk peace while bringing their weapons up to date (4-5). God is viewed as "an extinct concept" (11), and the scientists, "immaculately dressed not/conceived" (18-19), preach from their space stations, calling humanity to consider "the clockwork birds" and the "fabricated lilies" (21-22). Jesus uses the example of the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field to urge his hearers towards the righteousness of the kingdom of God (Matthew 6.33), but implicit in the title 'Eschatology' is the verdict that following these scientists or the machines of 'Digest', leads only towards the apocalyptic abyss.

Thus in these and many other poems,<sup>139</sup> the priest-poet issues his prophetic warning that humankind's infatuation with technology and profit leads inevitably to spiritual genocide and the destruction of what it means to be human. Yet true prophets do not simply oppose the present course of their culture. Their warnings offer an escape route, an alternative course of action, and a vision of a better way:

Wash you; make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow . . . If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword (Isaiah 1.16-17, 19-20)

In this regard, Thomas has problems. Like a satirist, he can critique society's malaise more easily than he can offer a concrete alternative. Perhaps this is why he denies that he is a prophet, though he considers that "if the true prophets could be listened to . . . there could be some sort of better world".<sup>140</sup> Perhaps his uneasiness with the prophetic mantle is also a recognition of the limits of his Romanticism. As the previous chapter indicated, Thomas knows, as Shelley and Arnold do not, that poetry alone cannot change the world. But his poetry does propose some tentative alternatives to civilisation's self-destructive course. Inherent in his indictment of the age is a call back to simplicity and virtue. He urges humanity to end its reliance upon technology and return to the difficulties of faith.

<sup>138</sup> Thomas quoted in Shepherd, p. 117, alluding to the Second Collect for Peace at Morning Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer*. "O God . . . whose service is perfect freedom . . .".

<sup>139</sup> 'Out There', 'God's Story', 'The Other', 'Asking', 'Circles', 'Incubation' etc.

<sup>140</sup> J.B. Lethbridge, p. 43.

Thus 'The Refusal' charts humanity's procession from "gilled man" to "winged man", through "man quadruped", "man erect", "Mobile man" and "wheeled man" (1, 2, 3, 8) but notes that the new "winged man" is no angel. The problem it pinpoints is his lack of faith (even if the object of this faith can not be specified):

... Wringing  
our hands, we wring our belief  
dry, refusing from pride  
or shame after the failure  
of our specifics the one cultivable  
remedy the intellect disdains. (25-30)

The only available remedy is disdained by the intellect. Yet, the pure in heart can still cultivate it. Images of cultivation and foliage are often associated with faith in Thomas' poetry and these cohere with his attacks on mechanistic technological reliance. One of his most clear-sighted visions of an alternative way, mentioned in the previous chapter, is 'The Kingdom'. This poem affirms that admission to the kingdom requires from inquirers only "the simple offering/Of [their] faith, green as a leaf":

It's a long way off but inside it  
There are quite different things going on:  
Festivals at which the poor man  
Is king and the consumptive is  
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look  
At themselves and love looks at them  
Back; and industry is for mending  
The bent bones and the minds fractured  
By life. It's a long way off, but to get  
There takes no time and admission  
Is free, if you will purge yourself  
Of desire, and present yourself with  
Your need only and the simple offering  
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

This re-invented sonnet appears so ingenuous that Dyson's uncertainty about whether it is wistful, bitter, or mocking is understandable.<sup>141</sup> Against the backdrop of some of Thomas' more cynical poems, its promise of the kingdom appears rather too good to be true. Yet the poetic reversal of values it propounds is in keeping with the message of the prophet and with the priest's gospel calling to summon people to 'the Kingdom' of God. The prophets conceive a future which sounds very like that of this poem, in which "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together" (Isaiah 65.25), where nations "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks" (Micah 4.3). Jesus similarly proclaims that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor (Luke 6.13) and involves the healing of the blind and broken-hearted (Luke 4.18). Joining with prophecy, poetry here acts on humanity's

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<sup>141</sup> Dyson (1981), p 307.

will to believe that there is an alternative way. It links the prophetic future with the messianic present and future to proclaim that the poor man should be king and that industry should mend bent bones and fractured minds. In simple, but emphatically poetic terms, Thomas allies his future promise with that of the prophets.

The poetic promise of the kingdom through faith also stands alongside strands in Thomas which urge a "stepping aside" from present bustle into the realm of eternity. In 'Where Do We Go From Here?', Thomas turns inward to stress "the knowledge --- half hope, half intuition" by which he lives. As indicated above, his weapons in response to the materialist paradigm of the age are the wisdom and vision of the poets and prophets. Quoting William Blake on spiritual vision, he then proceeds to attack materialistic folly with the weapons of poetry and spirituality:

With our greatest modern telescope we look out into the depths of space, but there is no heaven there. With our supersonic aircraft we annihilate time, but are no nearer eternity. May it not be that alongside us, made invisible by the thinnest of veils, is the heaven we seek? The immortality we must put on? Some of us, like Francis Thompson, know moments when "Those shaken mists a space unsettle". To a countryman it is the small field suddenly lit up by a ray of sunlight. It is T.S. Eliot's "still point, there the dance is", Wordsworth's "central peace, subsisting at the heart of endless agitation". It is even closer. It is within us, as Jesus said.<sup>142</sup>

United in their prophetic role, playing "on a small pipe, a little aside from the main road",<sup>143</sup> priest and poet affirm the nearness of eternity against the reductionism of the age. As Thomas understands their roles, they are calling for the same thing. Indeed, in 'Where Do We Go From Here', Thomas explicitly enlists both his vocations to oppose "scientology" (or "an increasingly commercialised or prostituted science").<sup>144</sup> In practice, their opposition involves urging stillness and turning aside as the route to spiritual fulfilment. In 'Aside', wisdom whispers at the elbow of the human race, urging us away from nuclear proliferation:

Progress  
is not with the machine;  
it is a turning aside,  
a bending over a still pool,  
where the bubbles arise  
from unseen depths, as from truth  
breathing, showing us by their roundness  
the roundness of our world. (24-31)

Against the sterility of the machine age (portrayed in language of destruction — "wounds", "incinerating", "annihilation" (18, 16, 21)), the truth of eternity is alive and breathing, evoked here in round vowels which suggest room for truth and mystery to live and grow.

<sup>142</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Where Do We Go From Here?', pp. 120-121.

<sup>143</sup> Merchant, p. 4, quoting *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, Christmas 1968.

Against the incineration being visited upon the planet, this "roundness" suggests completeness.<sup>145</sup> The insistent proclamation of such poems is that quietness, stillness and love can provide wholeness. They are the priest-poet's prophetic prescription for combating the spiralling catastrophe of contemporary civilisation.

The priest's cure, not on prescription, is  
that love's casualties must be mended by love. (Parables', 9-10)

Of course, it is artificial to confine Thomas' poetry to a prophetic role. It can, as seen, play the hieratic role of offering people's suffering to God, and it also has a sacramental element. Although the Christian sacraments are linked specifically to the Christian narrative, Thomas conceives poetry as a sacrament in the vaguer sense of a means for glimpsing the transcendent. Thomas' debt to Coleridge's conception of the poet as a mediator of ultimate reality has already been quoted, and this harmonises well with his suggestions elsewhere that Christianity and poetry are linked by the importance to both of metaphor:

As a priest, I am committed to the ministry of the word and the ministry of the sacraments. Well, word is metaphor, language is sacrament, sacrament is language . . . In presenting the sacrament, administering the sacrament of bread and wine to the congregation I am again . . . using a means, a medium of contact with reality . . .<sup>146</sup>

Like the prophet's poetic proclamation, the eucharistic sacrament affirms the possibility of connection with the spiritual world. Williams wonders whether, in their confrontations with transcendence, Thomas' poems may extend their sacramental role by achieving the condition of absolution, glimpsing the transcendent in a way that resolves the poems' difficulties, quests and pains. Certainly, the "reversals, metaphoric jolts [and] aphoristic closures"<sup>147</sup> which often end Thomas' poems regularly abandon ordinary syntax in an attempt to approximate transcendent experience. As the language approaches this experience, it stumbles before God's ultimate reality,<sup>148</sup> yet in reaching beyond itself, proves strangely adequate. For, in these endings,

<sup>144</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Where Do We Go From Here?', p. 118.

<sup>145</sup> Compare 'Evening' which bids us stand "till the silence/turn golden and love is/a moment eternally overflowing" (6-8); 'Wrong' which warns us against "breathless journeys/into confusion", but counsels "stepping/aside through the invisible/veil that is about us into a state/not place of innocence and delight" (19-23); 'This One' praises the man who ignores the "laughter out of the speeding/vehicles", mocked because he has chosen to be still, "half-way . . ./in a better direction".

<sup>146</sup> Ormond, p. 53. Thomas makes similar points in other interviews and writings: "How can anyone who is not a poet ever fully understand the gospels with their accumulation of metaphor?" ('A Frame for Poetry', p. 69).

<sup>147</sup> Rowan Williams, "Adult Geometry": Dangerous Thoughts in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas', in *The Page's Drift*, pp. 82-98, (p. 94). He tends to suggest that Thomas does not attain absolution.

<sup>148</sup> Herman, p. 719: "language as goal, as a means of arriving at meaning or Truth . . . is rendered futile".





In his discussion of Herbert, Thomas develops his claims for a “fruitful relationship between Christianity and poetry” through the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Incarnation, he says, shows that both Christianity and poetry are concerned with the “redemption and consecration” of “the concrete and particular”.<sup>151</sup> Thomas then points to Herbert as the embodiment of Anglican discipline, “a way of life for the individual that is still viable . . . based on order and discipline, the soul’s good form”. It is thus “a proof of the eternal beauty of holiness”.<sup>152</sup> Thomas here treats Herbert’s life as a sacramental embodiment of his prophet’s alternative to civilisation’s present course. Thomas is thus like Kierkegaard, who denying that his critiques were prophetic, preferred to be regarded “as a poet who points to “heroes of faith””.<sup>153</sup> Kierkegaard’s heroes of faith were emphatically not clergymen, but neither, solely, are Thomas’. His heroes include Kierkegaard, Bishop Morgan (translator of the Welsh Bible) and the Welsh Methodist visionary and hymn-writer, Ann Griffiths (1776-1805).<sup>154</sup> Space precludes full treatment of these figures, but the ‘Fugue for Ann Griffiths’ concludes in a way that brings together Thomas’ condemnation of the way of the world and the prophetic alternative to it that Ann lived. In a rhetorical question typical of Thomas, the speaker asks whether the one who called Ann “when the tree was green”, calls us also “to the same thing”, even though, now, in the machine age,

. . . the leaves have fallen and the boughs  
are of plastic . . . (173-176)

The answer would appear to be a tentative “yes”, although Thomas knows that changed times call for changed poetry. Thomas’ faith and poetry are rather less rhapsodic than Ann’s,<sup>155</sup> for the twentieth century tree is dry and language “deciduous” (‘Postscript’ (12)). But he will nevertheless follow her lead in faith and poetry. Thus the poem exhorts us to listen to God as “She listened to him” (177), so that we can

. . . infer  
from the union of time  
with space the possibility  
of survival. (180-183)

<sup>151</sup> *A Choice of George Herbert's Verse*, ed. by R.S. Thomas (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 15.

<sup>152</sup> *A Choice of George Herbert's Verse*, p. 17.

<sup>153</sup> David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 214, 215.

<sup>154</sup> Ann also features in ‘Ann Griffith’ and ‘The Minister’. ‘Llanrhacadr ym Mochnant’ and ‘R.I.P.’ are specifically about Bishop Morgan. There are allusions to Kierkegaard in many poems, who is the main subject of ‘Kierkegaard’, ‘S.K.’, and ‘A Grave Unvisited’.

<sup>155</sup> Winkle, p. 408, notes that Thomas does not “assert basic tenets [of faith] gloriously anew” as Ann does.

Doubtless, there are connotations of Welsh nationalism in "survival",<sup>156</sup> but the prophet's voice is also declaring that Christian humility is necessary if the human race is to survive. In the background is Eliot's view that the Incarnation involves the "impossible union/Of spheres of existence" a union which enables "freedom/From past and future also".<sup>157</sup> Living like Ann, Thomas suggests, leads to this same kind of freedom. Although the time differential between her and us means that our approaches must be different, the purpose of the journey is the same:

... let us put on speed  
to remain still  
through the dark hours  
in which prayer gathers  
on the brow like dew,  
where at dawn the footprints  
of one who invisibly  
but so close passed  
discover a direction. (188-196)

Right action and future direction are not to be found in the machine. Rather, it is in the paradox of speeding up to remain still, rationing our fuel and pinning our wings that our "direction" is discovered. Amidst the customarily puzzling syntax of the closing lines, it is clear that the invisible visitor who knows the way is to be followed in preference to humanity. For "dawn" suggests Easter morning (perhaps even Herbert's 'Easter'), while "the footprints" remember Thomas' own 'Via Negativa', where "the echoes/We follow" are "the footprints he has just/Left" (8-10)).<sup>158</sup> Christ himself, it seems, is "the ultimate in 'alternative' subject-matter", in poetry which is ultimately "a matter of life not of art".<sup>159</sup> The poet proclaims an alternative to the twentieth century wasteland which is found in such unusual places as the wayside vision of Ann Griffiths, who sacramentally unites heaven and earth and points, intermittently and uncertainly, on the way of Christ.

### *The poetic liberation of priestly vocation*

The interaction between the poetry and religious commitment of these three men is inevitably complicated and fraught. Yet consistently, if surprisingly, they channel their experiences of suffering into poetry which continues their priestly work to their readers. In recording the painful vacillations of his faith commitment, Herbert creates a poetry of

<sup>156</sup> As Winkle says, p. 407.

<sup>157</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages' V.

<sup>158</sup> There may also be an echo in "dark hours" of Eliot's 'Little Gidding' II where the "familiar compound ghost" visits "In the uncertain hour before the morning/Near the ending of interminable night".

<sup>159</sup> Walford Davies, 'Bright Fields, Loud Hills and the Glimpsed Good Place: R.S. Thomas and Dylan Thomas', in *The Page's Drift*, pp. 171-210 (p. 192). Davies' comment is specifically about Thomas' creation of a purely Welsh identity, but his comment also seems applicable to Thomas' faith.

pastoral example which interprets his life for the guidance of his readers. Secure in his theology and confident that all his experiences lead back to God, he views suffering as the way of Christ. In leading others on this way, past the cross to the banquet of the kingdom, Herbert has no hesitations in creating a community of readers around the King of grief. Hopkins, less relational in his attitude to Christ (as the next chapter suggests) is much less comfortable distilling his experience of desolation into priestly poetry. Finally, however, when the attacks without and the terror within become unbearable, a fiercesome poetry emerges which remains committed to God even in the centre of the whirlwind and which is surprisingly priestly. For the centre of the stormy great sacrifice is where the priest must stand, sharing the sufferings of Christ and mediating them as a sacerdotal priest to his readers. Generally, 'Thomas' poetry stands outside suffering, looking in. Yet his faithful witness to the suffering of his people has a surprisingly sacerdotal function. His poetry presents his people's suffering to God, in anger, in pity and desperation. More obviously, in his less dogmatic concept of the priesthood, his response to the degradation around him issues in a prophetic poetry which proclaims a spiritual alternative to the faithless mechanisation of his age.

Of course, this division — Herbert as poet-pastor, Hopkins as sacramental priest and Thomas as prophet — is artificial, because these priestly duties overlap and blur. The sacramental duties of the priest, for example, are both prophetic and pastoral. Prophetic, because the eucharist proclaims the counter-cultural way of the kingdom,<sup>160</sup> and pastoral because the eucharist calls the Christian community into being and shapes the lives of the faithful. Likewise, by acting as a pastor, the priest's actions prophetically proclaim and sacramentally embody an alternative way of life. Finally, too, of course, poetry at its best shares the sacramental task. Shaw writes of Herbert and Donne that "Poetry and the priesthood harmonize . . . in their being sacramental activities, each a means of realizing the presence of God and imparting that presence to others."<sup>161</sup> This means pointing to transcendence in Thomas' case, to Christ's blood in Herbert's case, and to desperate Christly coherence in Hopkins'. Their poetry liberates them to continue their priestly vocations out beyond their parishes and into the world, and indeed it calls in each case for a response beyond the words on the page. Herbert's attitude towards poetry may have been slightly dismissive, and Hopkins' downright suspicious, but as with Thomas, it is

<sup>160</sup> Compare N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 558: "Jesus' actions with the bread and cup ... carry prophetic power, effecting the events ... which are then to occur". The redefined Passover meal proclaims the new covenant, the end of exile and the forgiveness of sins (557).

poetry which saves them all from rural obscurity and continues their ministry long beyond the grave. That this happens through suffering indicates the paradoxical nature of the priest-poet's life and duties. Suffering might be thought to drive the vocations apart, but in fact, the poetry of the suffering priest-poet witnesses to a faith which, as the eucharist shows, mixes wholeness and brokenness. Out of their personal acquaintance with suffering and despair, their books recall and remember — prophetically, pastorally and sacramentally — the way of Christ.

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<sup>161</sup> Shaw, p. 95.

## Chapter Five: Christology and Vocation

### *The problem of Christology*

Christ's centrality to the Christian faith, his role as the Great High Priest and his sacrificial death recalled in the eucharist explain why the discussion of the preceding chapters has tended ever Christ-wards. Christ is the originator of the priest's vocation and the priest is in turn the guardian of the Christian tradition about Christ, so that Christ always hovers in the background of the priest's poetry. Yet his appearances in the poetry are often puzzling. This chapter examines Christ's role in Hopkins, Herbert and Thomas' poetry, discussing how poetry helps them address the Christological problem, how Christ informs their vocational understanding, and the extent to which their dual status as priest-poets embodies his example. It suggests, finally, that Christ's enigmatic presence is of great importance to their poetry and any priestly work it does, largely because of the tensions which each of them experiences in imitating Christ. The tensions are therefore an integral part of their priestly ministry as Forsyth identifies:

In the minister's one person, the human spirit speaks to God, and the Holy Spirit speaks to men. No wonder he is often rent asunder. No wonder he snaps in such tension. It broke the heart of Christ. But it let out in the act the heart of God.<sup>1</sup>

In his poetry, the priest-poet illustrates the fractured way of the cross, the place of incomprehensible suffering which lets out the heart of God. He is ideally if painfully placed to show forth the way of Christ.

For in some sense, all Christologies are theological attempts to deal with the poetic problem of interpreting Christ's appearances in the gospels and in individuals' experiences. The New Testament writers use the language of both Godhead and manhood to describe Jesus, so that later Christian interpreters grappling with Christ come up against the disorienting paradox of someone apparently both human and divine.<sup>2</sup> Dealing with paradox, of course, is usually the poet's task and it gives the theologian all manner of difficulties. What emphasis, for example, should be placed on Christ's human and divine natures? Too great a stress on Christ's divinity grates against the gospel accounts of the man who suffered under Pilate, creating a figure who can hardly identify with human

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<sup>1</sup> P.T. Forsyth quoted in Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today*, new rev. edn. (London: SPCK, 1985), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> So, in very different ways, D.M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement*, 1vrd edn (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 80; John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, revd edn (London: SCM, 1977), pp. 294-295; N.T. Wright in N.T. Wright and Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (London: SPCK, 1999), pp. 161-162.

weakness.<sup>3</sup> A too human Jesus, conversely, is powerless to effect any reconciliation between God and humanity and gives no cause to be worshipped.<sup>4</sup> The difficulty lies in the combination. When formulated, it is liable to create a false coherence and "produce distortion",<sup>5</sup> ignoring the complications of reality. But as the confusing material of the gospel stories indicates, Christ mixes categories, turns tables and defies dogma.<sup>6</sup> In this, the priest-poet needs poetry to enable engagement with the disorienting paradoxes Christ poses. In so engaging, the priest-poet discovers the painful point in his own life where death and resurrection meet, the point which enables him to perform a priestly role by pointing his readers towards a similar encounter.

### *Hopkins — Christology or Christ?*

Christology is one of Hopkins' central pre-occupations, a truism obvious from the place transubstantiation had in sealing his conversion.<sup>7</sup> Transubstantiation crowned his understanding of Christ's Incarnation and so helped him to construct an alternative to the system of materialist rationalism that dominated his age.<sup>8</sup> Yet there is in Hopkins a tension between the Christology vital to his system and the Christ who unsettles the system with his terrifying presence. For although Hopkins is sure that Christ stands behind his priestly work, he is less sure that this is true of his poetry. Yet until the end, the unsettling figure of Christ forces Hopkins to revise his understanding of God and also, perhaps, his understanding of poetry.

Even in Hopkins' early work, Christ has an important place in his poetry. Downes argues that Hopkins' mature poetry is separated from his early work largely by its serious engagement with the Incarnation. He suggests that this involves a particular religious experience in which Hopkins responded emotionally to what had previously been only doctrinal knowledge, realising "at an affective level . . . what is meant by the Incarnation".<sup>9</sup> Downes' intuition is not capable of strict proof, but Hopkins' earliest poetry is certainly less dynamic than his mature work. No doubt, this difference can be attributed to the

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Baillie, p. 11; Macquarrie, p. 295.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Baillie, pp. 63-65, 170; Wright (1999), pp. 97, 167-168.

<sup>5</sup> Macquarrie, p. 309.

<sup>6</sup> Compare Cunningham, pp. 401-402; William F. Lynch, *Christ and Apollo: the Dimensions of the Literary Imagination*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975) p. 190.

<sup>7</sup> This is explicit in the letter to his father defending his conversion. If, he says, he ever doubted "that the least fragment of the consecrated elements in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar [was] the whole Body of Christ", he would "become an atheist the next day" (*Further Letters*, p. 92, (16 October 1866)).

<sup>8</sup> Brown, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Downes (1983), p. 93.

poetic innovations of Hopkins' maturity but also to the fact that the early poems read like formal exercises in religion; like, as Downes says, "representations of the *manners* of religion" rather than expressions of "an abiding, richly profuse experience of personal faith".<sup>10</sup> 'Barnfloor and Winepress', for example, is fashioned from a web of eucharistic allusions and scriptural references which Herbert uses in 'Peace', 'The Bunch of Grapes' and 'The Agonie',<sup>11</sup> yet its careful craftsmanship cannot hide how derivative it is. The description of Christ as the "riv'n vine" who shoots forth as "the Tree" on "Easter morn" (22-23) (so that the wine "racked from the press" becomes "the sweet vintage of the Lord" (18-20)), uses the conventional contractions and poeticisms of hymnody ("riv'n", "morn"). Herbert has treated this subject before with greater drama and suspense. His 'Peace' draws the reader into a detective quest for peace which begins in a cave and concludes, startlingly and apparently far from where it began, in the eucharist. In 'Barnfloor and Winepress', this eucharistic terminus is in view from the outset. Herbert juxtaposes voices and introduces Christ in disguise, but Hopkins' poem speaks in the third person plural with the confident authority of the redeemed. It is too uniform and predictable to engage the reader as more than a conventional performance. 'Nondum' and 'The Halfway House' show similar accomplishment, but they are plaintive rather than anguished, failing to arrest the reader in their description of doctrinal uncertainties.

In 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', however, the lightning flash of Christ's presence electrifies both form and content. In Hywel Thomas' terms, this poem reads as if Hopkins ceased simply to believe things "about" Christian theology, and instead began to believe "in" their reality.<sup>12</sup> This rejuvenation may be due to personal experience as Downes suggests, but it certainly involves the conviction, grown under Scotist influence, that the beauty of this world and the beauty of its creator come together in Christ's Incarnation.<sup>13</sup> This conviction instils a new vigour into the poems of the 1870s,<sup>14</sup> fostering the new rhythm, the alliterative rhyming in Christ which explodes through the stanzas of 'The Deutschland' and distinguishes its tone from the studied control of the earlier poems. It now echoes the incarnating energy of Christ which Hopkins feels to underlie the world.<sup>15</sup> Yet the poem does not simply treat Christ as part of an abstract Christological doctrine.

<sup>10</sup> Downes (1983), p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g. Tuve, pp. 161ff, 113ff, 117ff; Anthony Kenny, *God and Two Poets, Arthur Hugh Clough and Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1988), pp. 91-93.

<sup>12</sup> Hywel Thomas, p. 354.

<sup>13</sup> Hywel Thomas, p. 337 as quoted in Chapter One.

<sup>14</sup> Downes (1983), p. 96. Downes is not alone in this — see Devlin's notes in *Sermons*, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> e.g. McNeess, p. 72.

Rather, it presents an enraptured personal response to his Incarnation. In 'The Deutschland', the Incarnation is the fulcrum where "divine power through Jesus has become divine love in human form".<sup>16</sup> The poem stresses both Christ's mastery,<sup>17</sup> and his tender cherishing. He is "winter and warm" and "lightning and love" (70), combining stern justice and generous mercy. Knowledge of these attributes does not come solely from the speaker's experience of Christ but is anchored first in the gospel story. The poem then extrapolates these attributes to stress his cosmic role in the universe. Thus Christ's instressing presence in the world is linked in the first place to the "day/Of his going in Galilee" (49-50), where the majestic master of the tides knew the tenderness of the "Manger" and the "maiden's knee" (52). His earthly life also acquaints him with shipwreck and suffering, so that the poem glances appropriately at the gospel silencing of the storm (198) and especially at the "frightful sweat" of the "dense and driven passion" at Calvary (53, 63, 196). His paradoxical combination of life and death, his status as "the Life that died" (178) is integral to the poem's vivid portrait of a figure who combines suffering tenderness with resurrection mastery and whose interaction with his creation follows both these directions.

Indeed, with the attributes of tenderness and mastery established, the speaker observes them at work in his own experience, in the experience of the shipwreck victims, and finally applies them to interpret the entire cosmos.<sup>18</sup> His experience is interpreted primarily in Part the First which involves the depiction of what Downes calls a "falling in love with God".<sup>19</sup> As befits a love poem, Christ the beloved appears full of personality as the masterful wooer of the human heart, both tender and irresistible. This means that the tenderness of "the heart of the Host" (21) is matched by the "frown of [Christ's] face" (17), his "lightning and lashed rod" (10) and his "terror" (12). This is the figure, as Chapter Two showed, who drives Hopkins to the priesthood. These contrarities are then translated into the experience of the nuns and their fellow passengers who see Christ in his triumph, doing, dealing and lording it "with living and dead" (223). His prerogative is to "despatch and have done with his doom" (224), for, paradoxically, his mercy and tenderness will stop at nothing to establish his sovereign will both in human hearts and in the universe at large.

<sup>16</sup> Downes (1983), p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> As Cotter (1972), p. 152 points out, Christ is the "Thou mastering me/God" addressed at the opening of the poem. He is referred to later as the "Lord of living and dead" (4), the "adored King" (who makes "out of us all/Mastery" (79-80)), the "martyr-master" (167), and "the Master . . . the only one, Christ, King, Head" (220-221).

<sup>18</sup> Downes (1983), pp. 97-100.

<sup>19</sup> Downes (1983), p. 72.



This masterful figure drives the startled passengers back into the sheepfold of his mercy (248). He is also, the poem finally suggests, the "Ground of being" (254) who knits together the entire cosmos.

This new poetic enthusiasm clearly stems from Hopkins' Christology. Given the distance which Hopkins puts between his vocations, this is perhaps surprising, but in his correspondence, he maintains to Bridges that love for Christ was, ideally, the "great moving power and spring" of his verse. He insisted to Dixon similarly that Christ was the guiding star of his literary endeavours: "The only just judge, the only just literary critic, is Christ, who prizes . . . more than the receiver himself can, the gifts of his own making".<sup>20</sup> Miller observes that Hopkins often describes poetic inspiration in images of flowing water, flame and impregnation, the same language he uses to describe the descent of God's grace, so that "[a]ny definition of poetry, if pushed far enough, will lead back to Christ, for the ultimate origin and inspiration of poetry is the poet's love of God the Son".<sup>21</sup> It is therefore the Christocentric awareness underlying "The Deutschland" which motivates the ensuing nature sonnets. As the beauty of the bluebells is praiseworthy because it is the beauty of Christ,<sup>22</sup> so too "the just man" acts out his Christly nature, ("As Kingfishers" (9-12)),<sup>23</sup> the stars reveal Christ's glory as he presides at the heavenly wedding banquet ("The Starlight Night" (12-14)),<sup>24</sup> and the perfection of the windhover expresses the Christ who created it. The dedication of "The Windhover" "to Christ our Lord" is not to Hopkins' mind arbitrary, but essential to the true nature of the creature's beauty. The bird deeply interfuses the material and the spiritual,<sup>25</sup> in a combination which comes from Christ, "the ultimate principle of unity".<sup>26</sup> The celebratory vision of coherence evident here comes directly from the conviction that all creation is held together by Christly instress; that it is

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<sup>20</sup> *To Bridges*, p. 66 (15 February 1879); *To Dixon*, p. 8 (15 June 1878). Compare also *To Dixon*, p. 93: "Now if you value what I write, if I do myself, much more does our Lord" (1 December 1881). Hopkins' prose theological writings include a great deal more Christological speculation than can be discussed here. Under the influence of Scotus and others, he speculated that Christ's great sacrifice was determined before the foundation of the world, and that he had taken flesh for his entry into the angelic realm before his Incarnation into earthly time and space — see especially in the *Sermons*, pp. 170, 197ff. See Devlin's discussion of this at pp. 108-114.

<sup>21</sup> Miller, pp. 318, 317.

<sup>22</sup> Thus the famous Journal description of the bluebell concludes, "I know the beauty of our Lord by it" (*Journals*, p. 199).

<sup>23</sup> Brown, p. 254.

<sup>24</sup> Where the "piece-bright paling" "shuts the spouse/Christ home" — see N.H. MacKenzie (1981), p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, p. 256.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, p. 178. Compare p. 252: "Christ is to Hopkins the paradigm for the revelation of God through creation".

"word of, worded by" Christ the Word ('The Deutschland' (230)). Hopkins' poetic revival depends utterly on his Christological conviction.

Despite this, there is something unsatisfying about Christ's place in the wonderful, exuberant, Christ-in-nature poems that succeed 'The Deutschland'. Christ generally appears in them as little more than an amorphous cosmological principle around which the universe is organised, a metaphysical cipher or scholastic philosophical logos without the personality he radiated in 'The Deutschland'. This is partly, no doubt, because the greater length of 'The Deutschland' gives scope for a fuller delineation of Christ's character than does the sonnet form. Yet they also inhabit what Cotter calls an "innocent cosmos"<sup>27</sup> which is unrealistically fanciful. For, in order to perpetuate their vision of cosmic unity, many of the nature sonnets must downplay pain and evil.<sup>28</sup> They do not, says Cotter, picture "nature as wounded or groaning in itself for an unreceived redemption",<sup>29</sup> as the apostle Paul does in Romans 8.22. Of course, Hopkins was no pantheist and his poems always frustrate a pantheist reading,<sup>30</sup> but their Christ appears to be the Christ of Christology who seems only tangentially related to the Christ of the gospel. He is perhaps the Christ of Glory but he has scant connection to the King of Grief who gains his title through suffering. Instead, his place in 'The Starlight Night' could be taken by, say, Apollo or Zeus, while the Christ of 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire' or 'Hurrahing in Harvest' seems a rather ethereal cousin compared to the physical figure of the gospels. Of course, as Hopkins' sermons make clear,<sup>31</sup> he believed adamantly in the Christ of the Church's creeds, yet even here there lingers a tendency towards a fanciful treatment of Christ's human nature. In his celebrated "Christ as hero" sermon of 1879, Hopkins praises the physical and mental beauty of the incarnate Jesus and expresses his "eager desire" to see "the matchless beauty of Christ's body in the heavenly light".<sup>32</sup> Although he defends himself in this sermon from Apollinarianism,<sup>33</sup> Brown and Loades suggest that it actually depicts

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<sup>27</sup> Cotter (1972), p. 168.

<sup>28</sup> Obviously not all of them. 'God's Grandeur', 'Spring', and 'The Sea and the Skylark' all acknowledge evil, but this generally seems to come from humans as a threat to an order which could exist unmarred in the present.

<sup>29</sup> Cotter (1972), p. 170, although he also acknowledges that Hopkins does not disbelieve in the fall.

<sup>30</sup> Thus, for example, the "rod" of God's authority in 'God's Grandeur' counteracts a reading which would equate humanity with God, as does the careful differentiation between Christ and his saints in 'The Starlight Night'. Although these distinctions are clear in Hopkins' theology, they are not always so in his less devout readership.

<sup>31</sup> e.g. *Sermons*, p. 236.

<sup>32</sup> *Sermons*, p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> Apollinarianism is the belief that there was no human mind in Jesus, such that Jesus' humanity was different from ordinary humanity: see J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th revd. edn., (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1977), pp. 289-297.

Christ as barely human. "[H]ad the Incarnation been as Hopkins supposes it," they comment, it is doubtful how much Christ's Incarnation can be described "as a full entering into our humanity".<sup>34</sup> The sermon implies a platonic theology of the ideal which shies from the full implications of the Incarnation. Perhaps Hopkins' suspicion towards poetry had theological roots here as well.

For, in those poems which abandon the esoteric Christ in favour of a figure with recognisable gospel attributes, the poetry is more grounded and more secure. The densely allusive 'Windhover', for example, like 'The Deutschland', avoids dualism by acknowledging both suffering and triumph. Amidst the interpretative disputes surrounding this sonnet, it certainly manifests the vital principle that "every creature in its own selfing is as well a self-expression of Christ".<sup>35</sup> This applies to the windhover's glorious flight, but also to the poem's examples of utter humility in the final tercet, examples which evoke Christ's kenotic humility and death. They tie what might otherwise be a vague Christological presence to Christ's central sacrificial character. Consequently, such humble routine activity as ploughing "down sillion" is not simply "sheer plod" (12), but instead shares in the nature of Christ's great sacrifice. For the "gold" and "vermilion" at the heart of the "blue-bleak embers" (14, 13) have associations of royalty and bleeding, of "the martyr's blood and the crown of gold",<sup>36</sup> so that the sacrificial and regal light of the prince of heaven's crucifixion is cast over the entire poem. The poem does express the beauty of Christ through the inscape of the kestrel's flight, but it also concerns the fitness of all sacrifices that imitate Christ's kenotic sacrifice, suggesting that "the heart dedicated to service and sacrifice shines brightest".<sup>37</sup> The "sheer plod" of the ploughman and the fading of spent embers both express the spiritual truth embodied in Christ who "made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant . . . and became obedient unto death" (Philippians 2.7-8).<sup>38</sup> The hidden servant — ploughman, poet, priest — is following the hidden and earthly life of Christ, and following his pattern comforts

<sup>34</sup> David Brown and Ann Loades, 'Introduction: The Divine Poet' in *Christ: The Sacramental Word* ed. by David Brown and Ann Loades (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 1-25 (p. 8).

<sup>35</sup> David A. Downes, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins' Christed Vision of Ultimate Reality and Meaning', *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 12 (1989), 61-80, (p. 63).

<sup>36</sup> W.H. Gardner, 'The Religious Problem in G.M. Hopkins', in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Gerald Roberts (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 373-383 (p. 378).

<sup>37</sup> Graham Storey, *A Preface to Hopkins* (London: Longman, 1981), p. 107.

<sup>38</sup> This passage was important to Hopkins who paraphrases it in a letter to Bridges: Christ "could not but see what he was, God, but he would see it as if he did not see it" etc. (*To Bridges*, p. 175 (3 February 1883)).

everyone living "an obscure, constrained, and unsuccessful life".<sup>39</sup> Thus although Christ indeed represents "the ideal of heroic action",<sup>40</sup> this ideal is here conceived in kenotic Christian terms. Christ is the poet's "chevalier" (11),<sup>41</sup> but true chivalry is seen in the humblest of sacrifices.

This stress on sacrifice in 'The Windhover' begins a shift away from the portrayal of Christ as a purely metaphysical principle. In 'The Lantern Out of Doors', for example, Christ is Hopkins' "fast friend" (14), and in 'The Bugler's First Communion', he is the "Lord of the Eucharist" who personally supervises the fate of the young communicant (41-44). Eventually, of course, this re-personalisation of Christ foreshadows his fearful appearances in the terrible sonnets, where he is every bit as "dangerous" as 'The Windhover' threatened he might be. In these sonnets, the speaker falls "into the hands of the living God", discovering first hand that it is a "fearful thing" to experience (Hebrews 10.31). Here, Christ appears in his full terror for the first time since 'The Deutschland' and the language and imagery used to describe Christ in that poem recur. Thus 'Carrion Comfort' alludes to the speaker's acceptance of Christ's yoke ("all that toil . . . since . . . I kissed the rod" (10)), an acceptance also pictured in stanza 2 of 'The Deutschland', where the speaker says "yes" to Christ's "lightning and lashed rod" (9-10). The personal note common to these poems prompts Downes to insist that the sonnets as well as 'The Deutschland' are grounded in a personal and terrifying encounter. In the sonnets, he writes, God is "not absent or out there somewhere, but frighteningly present."<sup>42</sup> That frightening presence haunts the terrible sonnets as it stalked 'The Deutschland'. Where God in 'The Deutschland' is "lightning and love" and "a winter and warm" (70), the speaker in 'To Seem the Stranger' describes Christ as "my peace/my parting, sword and strife" (4). Indeed, the oxymoronic epithets in 'To Seem the Stranger' are more personal than those in 'The Deutschland'. They are attributes Jesus applies to himself in the gospel, warning that his coming brings swords rather than peace, and "set[s] a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother" (Matthew 10.34-35). The Christ of 'Carrion Comfort' brings similar strife into his disciple's life. He is a hero here but he is not docile. He is rather the gospel arbitrator who carries a fan "to purge his [threshing] floor and gather his wheat into the

<sup>39</sup> For Hopkins' thoughts on "the hidden life at Nazareth" and its applicability to his priestly vocation see *Sermons*, p. 176. Hopkins may also have been thinking of the ploughman as an analogue of the priest — see N.H. MacKenzie (1981), p. 84, quoting *To Dixon*, p. 88 (29 October 1881). Lawler, pp. 198-199 doubts it.

<sup>40</sup> Dennis Ward, 'The Windhover: to Christ our Lord', in Bottrall, pp. 168-182 (p. 177).

<sup>41</sup> The chevalier is probably Christ, although this identification is disputed. (It is also read as the bird, Christ or the speaker's heart. See MacKenzie (1990), p. 383; Ward, p. 178; Lawler, p. 191.)

<sup>42</sup> Downes (1983), p. 112.

garner", before burning the chaff "with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3.12). The speaker of 'Carrion Comfort' has been visited with exactly this treatment, and he complains of it to the "terrible" one bearing the fan:

... O thou terrible, why wouldst thou ride on me  
Thy wring-earth right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan  
With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,  
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee? (4-7)

This heaven-handling, fan-carrying figure can only be Christ, recognisable from the gospel as one intent on winnowing the speaker until his grain lies "sheer and clear" (9). He is the Christ whose foot treads the speaker (12), Christ who "treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God" (Revelation 19.15).<sup>43</sup> The speaker makes this identification himself, discovering that his wrestling opponent is, in his words, "(my God!) my God" (14). This lion is no passive principle of godhead, but the active master of "The Deutschland", powerfully and terrifyingly bending the speaker to his will.

Yet even as the speaker of the sonnets meets Christ's conquering mastery, he discovers a mysterious equality between them. For like Christ, the speaker of the sonnets has mysteriously suffered dislocation in accordance with the will of God. As Chapter Four suggested, the sonnets assume the experience of the cross, both in the sense that they assume the presence of the cross as a background context, but also in the sense that their speaker *takes on* something of its terrible suffering. The poet of the hidden life hears Christ's call and in obeying it, he discovers that he is called to be as Christ was, in his poetry and in his priesthood. Thus the speaker must, as 'Patience, hard thing' counsels, develop the patience shown by Christ, for "he who more and more distills/Delicious kindness" is himself "patient" (12-13). This is primarily a reference to the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete. But Christ is also a Paraclete,<sup>44</sup> and even he, according to Hebrews 5.8, learned patient obedience through suffering. In following Christ, the speaker of the terrible sonnets must learn as Christ learned. The etymology of "patient" stresses this link, for a patient is one who suffers, and this patient of the divine surgeon is suffering what Wolfe calls "a Gethsemane of the mind", which Christ has experienced before him.<sup>45</sup> This is clearest in the closing words of 'Carrion Comfort', where, as the speaker identifies his

<sup>43</sup> Compare Isaiah 63.1-6, to which Revelation 19 alludes.

<sup>44</sup> *Sermons*, pp. 70-71. See Catherine Phillips' edition of Hopkins' poems, p. 374. In 1 John 2.1 Jesus is the "advocate" with the Father.

<sup>45</sup> Patricia A. Wolfe, 'The Paradox of Self: A Study of Hopkins' Spiritual Conflict in the Terrible Sonnets', *Victorian Poetry*, 6 (1968), 85-103 (p. 85). Compare Loomis, p. 141: "If Hopkins is to become like Christ" he must follow the "Jesus of Gethsemane and Golgotha"; *Sermons*, p. 260: "those . . . suffering in mind and as I do".

wrestling opponent, he stumbles almost unconsciously upon the words of the dying Jesus: "That night, that year/Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God" (13-14). In using Christ's words here,<sup>46</sup> words which express the fear that his mission has utterly failed, the speaker's terrifying experience folds into Christ's experience of total desolation and abandonment by God. R.S. Thomas, as already quoted, suggests that the terrible sonnets, perhaps Hopkins' greatest poetry, repeat the cry from the cross.<sup>47</sup>

Paradoxically, however, Mariani calls this "the *privilege* of being crucified with Christ",<sup>48</sup> for the moment of terror is also the moment of total identification with God through Christ. Perhaps too blithely, but nonetheless rightly, Mariani notes that:

... there is also something of a startled, shrill whisper as [Hopkins] realizes Who was wrestling in the darkness with him. With the second "my God" there is a sense of resolution, of fulfillment in submission.<sup>49</sup>

This submission means accepting that Christ's way involves following his path to the cross, inscaping his pain as well as inscaping his beauty in the natural world. Again, as Chapter Four indicated, "asking to be raised to a higher degree of grace" in following Christ, involves being "lifted on a higher cross".<sup>50</sup> Following Christ's vocational call forces Hopkins to discover more fully what commitment to the crucified Christ entails, leading him to the mystery of the cross, and to the mystery of "the suffering interior self of Christ", which, as Ong remarks, "does not admit of total articulation".<sup>51</sup> The Mass gives the priest some indication of that mystery, but the reader sees the depths of suffering graphically embodied in the terrible sonnets. In the sonnets, the poet discovers and presents to the reader the central terror and mystery of Christian theology, which Hopkins' earlier Christology too readily obscured. That mystery breaks expectations of what God should be like and of what poetry should involve by presenting the full suffering of Christ.

According to Downes, Hopkins believed that a proper emulation of Christ's great sacrifice required him to give up poetry completely. This argument traces the astringency of the final poems to Hopkins' growing awareness that writing poetry was "a blot on his Christian

<sup>46</sup> "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27.46; Mark 15.34, quoting Psalm 22.1).

<sup>47</sup> R.S. Thomas, Introduction to the *Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, p. 50.

<sup>48</sup> Mariani, p. 233 (emphasis added).

<sup>49</sup> Mariani, p. 233.

<sup>50</sup> *Sermons*, p. 254.

<sup>51</sup> Ong, p. 152.

service record".<sup>52</sup> The problem with this argument is that it does not explain why Hopkins continued to write when his most astringent poems were behind him. In some ways, though, the terrible sonnets' enforced immersion into Christ's suffering provides a partial answer. In discovering that identification with Christ involves raw suffering, Hopkins finds his lingering suspicion of the material and the poetic challenged. This discovery sits at the root of his final great Christological poem, 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection'. Because it begins from the inescapable knowledge of mortality and despair gained in the terrible sonnets, and because it links humanity with Christ even in despair, it therefore links humanity and humanity's tasks with his resurrected glory. Such identification would have been impossible with the transcendent Christ of the nature sonnets. Thus the early Greek philosophy which Hopkins told Bridges is distilled in this extended sonnet<sup>53</sup> works to decidedly Christian ends. Heraclitus probably saw the elements involved in "a constant exchange of state", where fire transmutes into water and water condenses into earth.<sup>54</sup> Ordinarily, only the descent of the elements is visible, which the poem traces as it occurs in nature, culminating in man's "firedint" drowning in the "enormous dark" (11-13). Concurrent with this fatalistic descent, however, the poem traces the invisible ascent in which the sodden "earth" is beaten bare into "dust" and the water evaporates into the air and on into the fire of the sun.<sup>55</sup> With this pattern of descent-ascent subtly established, Christ's resurrection is introduced as its crowning instance. From one point of view, the resurrection which coincides with the volta in line 16 is rather "too sudden and unconvincing".<sup>56</sup> It is certainly the desperate hope of a doomed man. Yet from another viewpoint, this makes it a mature understanding of Christology. Overtaking its pessimistic pre-Socratic imagery of flux and renewal, the poem's focus on Christ combines the mysteries of doom and hope, crucifixion and resurrection without lapsing into the earlier abstract Christology. Hopkins learns, writes Milward,

... that Christ is not so present in all things as to redeem them in their existing forms, but sooner or later they must all be destroyed, and man with them, even as Christ himself died on the cross; but then death is the divinely appointed means to the realization of a new heaven and a new earth...<sup>57</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Downes (1983), p. 103. Compare also *To Dixon*, pp. 93-95: "it may be that the time will come for my verses"; *Sermons*, p. 108 where Devlin quotes *To Bridges*, p. 175 (3 February 1883) where Hopkins exposts Philippians 2.

<sup>53</sup> *To Bridges*, p. 291, (25 September 1888).

<sup>54</sup> N.H. MacKenzie (1981), p. 196. Compare Johnson, p. 237 who considers the elements involved in a "conflict of contraries".

<sup>55</sup> N.H. MacKenzie (1981), pp. 196-197.

<sup>56</sup> See Peter Milward, SJ, '1888: The Heraclitean Fire of Nature and the Grace of Resurrection', *Hopkins Quarterly*, 14 (1988), 77-83, (p. 80).

<sup>57</sup> Milward, p. 81.

Therefore, as Milward writes, the "comfort of the Resurrection . . . shines not so much in the beauty of Nature as in the dark way of the cross",<sup>58</sup> a way figured in the poem by the "beam" which shines a-cross the poet's foundering deck (18-19). Christ inhabits the dark places of experience, but it is there, in shipwreck and storm, that resurrection can occur. Thus Cotter suggests that the archetype for the "Manshape" which shines like a star in the poem before going out is "the incarnate Christ, the morning star", dying and yet resurrected, so that the clouds in the poem figure his ascension and look to his eschatological return.<sup>59</sup> Hopkins' career follows a similar paradoxical movement. Momentous consequences spring from his hidden life of suffering and obscurity. At the point where death and resurrection inexplicably merge, the sternly eschatological winnow of 'Carrion Comfort' meets and personalises the incarnational principle of the nature sonnets, and this is whom Hopkins is called to follow and imitate, in poetry and priesthood, amidst the decay, descent and glory of the natural world.

Remarkably, therefore, the defiant exultation of the 'Heraclitean Fire' has the suffering of the terrible sonnets behind it, and the full realisation of Christ's suffering behind that. Where the priest overstresses Christ's divinity in guarding Christological theology, the poet breaks these theological confines by discovering and entering Christ's earthly sufferings. The poet's experience drags the priest's Christology through Gethsemane so that the priest's picture of Christ can be adjusted to appreciate the true wonder of the resurrection. Again, Hopkins' use of Heraclitean philosophy demonstrates this. In Heraclitus, the *logos* is the principle of world-order, which Heraclitus probably associated with God.<sup>60</sup> Hopkins extrapolates it to foreshadow Christ, the logos of God.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Heraclitus' conception of God as "day night, winter summer, war peace, satiety hunger" (which Hippolytus glossed by saying that God is "all the opposites")<sup>62</sup> is remarkably like the Christ Hopkins meets across the range of his poetry: suffering and triumphant, human and divine, "'footfretted" man . . . and the fire of God".<sup>63</sup> And if Christ can contain seeming opposites, uniting the cosmic divinity of the nature sonnets with the human suffering of the terrible sonnets, so

<sup>58</sup> Milward, p. 82.

<sup>59</sup> Cotter (1986), pp. 270, 266.

<sup>60</sup> G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 191: "God cannot here be essentially different from Logos".

<sup>61</sup> Cotter (1972), p. 77, pointing to John 1 and also to Colossians 1.16 which assert that all things were made through Christ.

<sup>62</sup> Kirk, Raven and Schofield, p. 190.

<sup>63</sup> Johnson, p. 239. Compare St Bonaventura's description of Christ as "in one Being the first and the last, the highest and the lowest, the circumference and the center, the alpha and the omega, the caused and the cause,



too can Hopkins. When, in the flash of resurrection lightning, he acknowledges that humanity can be simultaneously "immortal diamond" and "poor potsherd", "I am" and "matchwood", the way is open for him to be both priest and poet. There is no need to be so esoteric, so priestly and aloof, for in the close of 'The Heraclitean Fire', Cotter says:

the "new self and nobler me" discovers the words and imagery of man made fully human through the humanity of Jesus who descended even unto death on a cross in order to bring permanence and meaning into ordinary life.<sup>64</sup>

The priest's task of pointing to Christ is also possible in the "words and imagery" of the poet who dwells in the depths of Christ's mystifying, inspiring and terrifying presence. As the baby in the manger, the renegade on the cross, is the lord of the universe, so he is lord of the cosmic priestly and earthly poetic tasks, or perhaps of the cosmic poetic and earthly priestly tasks. For as Colossians 1.20 insists, all things, be they things in earth or things in heaven, have been reconciled to him. It is up to the priest-poet to implement that in practice.

Of course, it can be argued that this represents a return to Christology. Even at the end, Hopkins is not fully and constantly confident that his poetry comes from Christ. Yet indubitable certainty is rarely available to those practising the imitatio Christi, for Christ himself was doomed, as Hopkins says, "to succeed by failure".<sup>65</sup> This success occurs when Christian faith moves from being what Downes calls a "memorized theory in the head" to become "a felt awareness actively incorporated in personal experience, sometimes terrifying and always disconcerting".<sup>66</sup> This is the witness of Hopkins' final poems, as his imitation of the Christ of theory is replaced by the journey into the personal Gethsemane where true vocational fidelity begins. The poet's shattering descent into hell challenges the priest's control on the system of the cosmic Christ. Hopkins' corpus, finally, needs both if it is to embody Christ's way and, in Forsyth's terms, to let out the "heart of God".

### *Herbert and the King of joy and grief*

If Herbert's situation lets out the heart of God it does so very differently. He rarely thinks of Jesus as the cosmic Christ who guarantees his universal system, for as Chapter One indicated, in Herbert's experience, Christ collapses systemic hierarchies and dwarfs humanity with his reversals. Jesus is important to Herbert, not as the cosmic or scholastic

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the creator and the creature, the book written within and without" - *The Mind's Road to God*, quoted in Cotter (1972), p. 22.

<sup>64</sup> Cotter (1972), p. 236.

<sup>65</sup> *To Dixon*, p. 138 (3 July 1886).

Christ, but as a friend whom he meets in the eucharist, in the biblical story and in his own life. Christ is the friend who roams through Herbert's poetry and calls it into being as well as the suffering Christ of glory whom Herbert meets in the poetic liturgy of the eucharist and who calls him to call others as a priest to the heavenly feast.

Christ's constant presence in 'The Church', enables Hughes to assert that the Incarnation "is the central issue of Herbert's poetry".<sup>67</sup> Certainly, many Herbert poems appeal to Christ's life, and through his passion, his presence in the eucharist informs the entire collection. "Communion imagery", Martz observes, "permeates the *Temple* . . . in dozens of brief references to the "feast," the "board," the "meat," the "banquet," the "blood," the Cross, the wounds".<sup>68</sup> To a Reformed Protestant like Herbert, such imagery depends entirely on the sacrificial death of the historical Jesus. Sacrifice for Herbert is not stamped into Christ's nature from before the foundation of the world, as Hopkins considered. Rather, the speaker of 'The Holy Communion' looks to the one-off event on Calvary, where, he says, Christ "from me wast sold" (3). Only because of that occurrence can Christ's grace enter "the souls most subtile rooms" (22). Only after "God took bloud" and "Spilt" it for the speaker (34-35) does his presence in the eucharist follow (92). Christ's presence is not connected with the nature of the world. Herbert does not look at a rose to see Christ, as Hopkins looks at a kestrel. Rather, roses remind him of mortality and condemn worldly pleasure ('Vertue', 'The Rose'). The view of nature in his poetry is less sacramental than didactic.<sup>69</sup> His sacramentalism is rooted in the story of Christ.

This emerges in passing from 'Ungratefulnesse' which outlines God's "two rare cabinets full of treasure", the Trinity and the Incarnation (7-8). Addressing God, the speaker describes these doctrines as "jewels" which he suggests have been made

. . . to betroth  
 'The work of thy creation  
 Unto thy self in everlasting pleasure. (10-12)

<sup>66</sup> Downes (1983), pp. 36-37.

<sup>67</sup> Richard E. Hughes, 'George Herbert and the Incarnation', in *Essential Articles for the Study of George Herbert's Poetry*, ed. by John R. Roberts (Hamden: Archon, 1979) pp. 52-62 (p. 62, p. 53).

<sup>68</sup> Martz, p. 302.

<sup>69</sup> Compare Richard Strier on 'Man' in 'Ironie Humanism in *The Temple*', in "*Too Rich to Cluthe the Sunne*"; *Essays on George Herbert*, ed. by Claude J. Summers and Tod-Larry Peabworth (Pittsburgh Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), pp. 33-52, (p. 38). The few descriptions of nature in 'The Temple' ('Man', 'Providence') operate to demonstrate God's providence towards humanity and Strier says, to ironically undercut humanist views of man, rather than to extol Christ as the agent of creation.

These lines cast God as the suitor who will spare no expense in winning the hearts of his human creatures. Implicit here is the image of Christ as the bridegroom,<sup>70</sup> a homely image befitting a Christology centred on Christ's action in history and story, rather than his place in an abstruse system. It also suggests Christ's humanity and approachability. Thus, 'Ungratefulnesse' continues that, although we can not understand the Trinity (its "sparkling light accesse denies") (14), we can understand the Incarnation. As humans, "this box we know;/For we have all of us just such another" (23-24).<sup>71</sup> Christ's Incarnation allows us intimate knowledge of God.

Yet this intimacy is not an inevitable result of the doctrine. Hopkins is equally convinced of the Incarnation, yet the Christ of his nature poems can be distant and remote. Rather, as Vendler points out, the intimacy is communicated through the human plausibility in Herbert's portrayal of Christ, which in turn comes because Herbert is convinced of the possibility of personally relating to Christ. Whenever he appears, Vendler insists that "Herbert's Jesus always carries on a true conversation, whether his intent is comfort . . . or reproach",<sup>72</sup> and this enables the reader to identify with him. Thus, the divine partner in 'Dialogue' is at once a gently chastening father figure ("*What (childe) is the ballance thine*" (9)), and the "Sweetest Saviour" (1) who, he says of himself, "*did freely part/With my glorie and desert,/Left all joyes to feel all smart*" (29-31). This tone is almost casual and it establishes an utterly personal Christ who, in the course of the poem, "uses all the most human of means — irony, pun, comparison with himself — to win the sinner",<sup>73</sup> Listening to this figure's intimate tone, both speaker and reader are persuaded to follow where he leads.

The possibility for intimate knowledge of Christ is confirmed in those poems where he appears as Herbert's friend.<sup>74</sup> In Hopkins' poetry, as in stanza 28 of 'The Deutschland' or in 'Carrion Comfort', Christ only appears through mist, veiled in mystery. Admittedly,

<sup>70</sup> See, among others, John 3.29, 2 Corinthians 11.2, Revelation 19.7, Song of Solomon.

<sup>71</sup> The voice of the teacher can be heard here again, illustrating his teaching with homely examples. Compare *A Priest to the Temple*, Chapter III, 'The Parsons Knowledge': "He condescends even to the knowledge of tillage, and pastorage, and makes great use of them in teaching, because people by what they understand, are best led to what they understand not" (p. 228).

<sup>72</sup> Vendler, p. 106 of 'The Collar' and 'Dialogue'. "Harvey's Christ speaks like a collect, Herbert's like a person" (107).

<sup>73</sup> Vendler, p. 125.

<sup>74</sup> 'Jordan' (2), 'Love Unknown', 'The Pilgrimage', 'The Holdfast'. The identification with Christ is not undisputed, but collectively, the references suggest a figure enigmatic enough to be Christ. Martz for example considers that "the friend is indeed his other self: the Christ who at the close reveals the full counsel of his 'inward speaking'" (p. 309).

Christ is *referred* to as a friend in two Hopkins poems,<sup>75</sup> but in *The Temple*, the unexpected friend actually *appears*, blurring into the figure of Christ who quizzes, challenges and unsettles the speaker. In 'Love Unknown', for example, the speaker's bumbling, ingenuous incomprehension at the treatment he receives from his Master<sup>76</sup> is met by the accurate diagnoses of his "Deare Friend" (1). The friend repeatedly approves the remedies the Master has prescribed for the speaker's hard heart: "*Your heart was foul, I fear*", "*Your heart was hard, I fear*", "*Your heart was dull, I fear*" (18, 37, 56). In the Christ-like friend's closing analysis, it emerges that he, like Christ (e.g. 1 Peter 1.15), eagerly desires the speaker's holiness:

*The Font did only, what was old, renew:  
The Caldron suppled, what was grown too hard:  
The Thorns did quicken, what was grown too dull:  
All did but strive to mend, what you had marr'd.* (64-67)

Friend and Master are closely allied. The friend readily approves his Master's actions and issues his own, complementary, advice. This advice typifies the mysterious friend's appearances in these poems. He never leaves his friends to their own devices. Rather, he is actively involved in their lives, with advice, admonition and action. In 'The Pilgrimage', the friend furnishes the "one good Angell" that saves the pilgrim from (spiritual) bankruptcy (17-18); in 'The Holdfast', he advises the speaker that all things are safer in God's care than human care; in 'Jordan' (2), he acts as the speaker's literary adviser, instructing him in what to write. Unlike the absent friend of 'Thou Art Indeed Just' to whom Hopkins can only complain, he busies himself in his follower's life.

Even if nothing else does, this involvement in others' stories confirms that Christ and the friend are one. For throughout *The Temple*, Christ's sanctifying involvement in the believer's life is the defining mark of his presence. He comes constantly to cleanse, comfort and guide the believer. In 'Good Friday', Christ's sorrows guide the speaker and offer cure for his sin (16, 19). In 'The Holy Communion', he comes to sanctify and offer nourishment (7), with his grace "Op'ning the souls most subtle rooms" to his cleansing work (19-22). Similar things could be said of 'Easter', 'The Dawning', 'Sunday' and 'Christmas', where Christ comes to work in his friends' best interests, painful though this work can be. Indeed, if the Incarnation begins Christ's identification with humanity, the pain of the cross completes it. Vendler suggests that Christ can only be known if he is "the

<sup>75</sup> 'The Lantern out of Doors' (14), 'Thou Art Indeed Just' (5).

<sup>76</sup> Strier (1983), p. 159 describes him as possibly "the least percipient [speaker] in *The Temple*".

man of sorrows acquainted with grief",<sup>77</sup> a connection Herbert makes at the conclusion of 'The Crosse'. Here, musing on his God-ordained sufferings, the speaker opines to God that

... these thy contradictions  
Are properly a crosse felt by thy sonne,  
With but foure words, my words, *Thy will be done*. (34-36)

The contradictions felt by the suffering Christian are said to be felt "*by thy Sonne*" rather than "*by me*", because as Mason says, "it is Christ who suffers the Christian's pain redemptively".<sup>78</sup> The Incarnation does not leave Christ remote from human experience, but in the suffering of the crucifixion, immerses him in the worst of that experience. Yet even as it allows identification with Christ, Christ's suffering is also, as Mason implies, unsettling and alienating. It is finally impossible for humans to identify with the unmatched "King of grief" ('The Thanksgiving' (1)). Thus, in 'The Sacrifice', Christ justly answers his own insistent rhetorical question, "Was ever grief like mine?" in the negative. There was never grief like his (216, 252). The speaker of the twin poems 'The Thanksgiving' and 'The Reprisal' learn this for themselves. At every step, the naïve speaker of 'The Thanksgiving' attempts to match Christ's sacrifice by acts of service and generosity, but beside the majesty of Christ's sacrifice, this is pointless. The incongruity of the speaker's attempt to match Christ's passion with his own cheerful charitable works is ludicrous. There is simply no comparison between Christ's assumption of the sin of the world and the speaker's threat to "build a spittle, or mend common wayes" (33). The imbalance between Christ and Herbert is such, Singleton says, that "no structural articulation of [their] relationship [is] even possible".<sup>79</sup> 'The Sacrifice' demonstrates this absurdity at length, as Christ points out again and again that those who seek to harm him are completely dependent on him:

They buffet me, and box me as they list,  
Who grasp the earth and heaven with my fist . . . (129-130)

There is, as the speaker of 'The Reprisal' is forced to conclude, "no dealing" with Christ's "mighty passion" (1-2), "no articing" with him ('The Artilleric' (31-32)). The passion is the moment at which identification with Christ is possible, but it simultaneously cancels any possibility of true identification. His "foes" cannot number his "woes" ('Good Friday' (5-6)), nor can all the autumnal leaves mirror his "grief" (9-10). The only response 'Good Friday' can suggest is a contrite and sorrowful admission of unworthiness in which true

<sup>77</sup> Vendler, p. 240, writing particularly of 'Affliction' (3).

<sup>78</sup> Kenneth Mason, *George Herbert: Priest and Poet* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1980), p. 26

<sup>79</sup> Singleton, p. 192.

sorrow cures the sinner's "several sinnes" (17-20), and openness to Christ's distresses paradoxically converts them into the speaker's "sunne" (15-16). This is the unsettling realm of paradox, but over that realm, as Chapter One suggested, Christ is king. Here, spiritual wholeness comes through sorrow and Christ's distress becomes the believer's sunshine. The Christ of 'Easter' is "up by break of day" (21), having left his followers far behind. But as seen above in 'Redemption', one of two poems wedged between 'Good Friday' and 'Easter', Christ is the master of surprise, destroying humanity's expectations of how redemption is to be effected. Although a "rich Lord" (1), he does not frequent the "great resorts" humans expect. Instead, he receives his supplicant amidst "theeves and murderers" (13) and in their ragged company dies.

This unpredictability is startling, but Christ acts this way throughout 'The Church'. In 'Christmas', he lies in wait for the flabbergasted speaker at an inn; in 'Love' (3), he invites the sin-stained speaker to attend the banquet of the kingdom. He is the comforter who loves but strikes, and casts down yet help affords ('Bitter-sweet' (2-3)). On closer inspection, Hughes's verdict that the Incarnation provides Herbert with a principle of seemly order is thus rather one-sided.<sup>80</sup> For as well as providing order, the Incarnation also turns tables, tears curtains and shatters social propriety. In this, Fish is right.<sup>81</sup> Christ continually unsettles the preconceptions and predilections of the speaker of 'The Church'. He meets the speaker's boasts with humility; his sinfulness with grace. Even the loving conclusion of 'Love' (3) leaves the speaker unquestionably in Christ's debt, a fact which Fish recognises and simultaneously rebels against.<sup>82</sup> However uncomfortable Fish is with it, Christ's guests are not, finally, on equal terms with him, but utterly dependent on his unsettling invitation. Thus rather than conflating the speaker with Christ,<sup>83</sup> the conclusion of 'The Church' meets him with a final reversal in Christ's great sequence of reversals. Christ's invitation will lead ultimately to true stability, but that stability lies outside *The Temple* and is achieved only through costly love. In this life, Christ is the King of grief as much as glory and following him involves experiencing a series of extremes which are embodied in the poetry of the poet who follows him.

Of course, as Herbert's friend Christ is also his God, his inscrutability is fitting. But there are passages within *The Temple* where this inscrutability seems to lead to the sundering of

<sup>80</sup> "Meaninglessness brought to order, on any plane, reflects the Incarnation" (Hughes, p. 54).

<sup>81</sup> Fish (1978), pp. 67, 125.

<sup>82</sup> Fish (1978), pp. 131-136.

Father and Son. Certainly, Vendler argues that the tone of the 'Affliction' poems, which invariably address Christ, differs from the tone in poems which address the Father. Because the Father has not suffered, Vendler argues that he

... is unamenable to that identification with the suffering Herbert which Jesus can be imagined to assume. ... God the Father remains impossibly distant, unpropitiable, and dangerous, addressable only in self-humiliating groans.<sup>84</sup>

This almost seems to be true of 'Judgement', where the sinful speaker placates the "Almighty Judge" (1) only by drawing his attention to a "Testament" recording the atoning sacrifice of the Son (13). Any sundering between them must be illusory if the Son's propitiation is to be effective. This is why the speaker assures the Father that if he reads the Testament, he will discover that, in the speaker's words, "my faults are thine" (15). This conclusion only follows if the Father and the Son are one.<sup>85</sup> Thus the apparent divisions in the Trinity which such poems display is the consequence of dealing with the New Testament texts. Although Herbert is committed a priori to the equality of Father and Son, poetry enables him to argue out the possibilities of such a position. Other poems stress Christ's divine attributes. In 'The Sacrifice', for example, Christ declares that he never thought it "any robbetrie" to "thrust into the Deitie" (62).<sup>86</sup> Despite Herbert's warning in 'Ungratefulnesse', the shifting perspectives of *The Temple* allow the mysteries of the Trinity and Incarnation to be approached in poetry.

Eventually, the mystery of Christ turns in on itself and becomes even further complicated. For although Christ's unsettling perplexity proves the gap between human finitude and godly perfection, Herbert concurrently insists that, in Christ, Christians come to participate in the life of the Godhead, through the doctrine of membership or participation in Christ, "that mutuall inward hold which Christ hath of us and wee of him".<sup>87</sup> The New Testament hints at this,<sup>88</sup> and it is formulated famously by Athanasius in the form that the Word "was made man that we might be made God".<sup>89</sup> Strier notes that the doctrine of participation is absolutely fundamental to the effective operation of Herbert's priestly vocation. Of 'Aaron', he writes that

<sup>83</sup> As Fish and Vendler in their different ways maintain; see Vendler, p. 152 and p. 291, n.4.

<sup>84</sup> Vendler, p. 241, writing explicitly of 'Sighs and Groans'.

<sup>85</sup> Similar tensions of difference and equation are evident in the "strange storie" of 'The Bag' (8), where Christ's human nature is to the fore during the story of his earthly life, but he nevertheless assures his "friends" (37) that the effect of petitioning him will be the same as petitioning the Father (33-34).

<sup>86</sup> Similar problems are raised in, for example, 'Dialogue'.

<sup>87</sup> Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, (56.1), quoted by Shaw (1981), p. 81.

<sup>88</sup> e.g. Ephesians 4.13; 1 John 3.1-3; Philippians 3.10-14; 2 Peter 1.4.

<sup>89</sup> St Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, (LIV.3), transl. by Archibald Robertson, 3rd edn (London: David Nutt, 1911), p. 93.

... Herbert presents the solution to the problem of man's unfitness in terms of an even deeper mystery, a mystery which emphasizes Incarnation rather than power and skill, the Pauline conception of "membership" in Christ. This conception emphasizes the intimacy of the union of believers with Christ and with one another.<sup>90</sup>

The key to this union, as St Paul stresses in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 5.23, is Christ. He heads the Christian body of interdependent believers who each individually participate in his body. This was evident in Chapter Two's discussion of 'Aaron' where the flawed priest has Christ as "another head" to direct and re-orient him. In Christ, the believer is "new drest" (20), clothed in, directed by and empowered by him.<sup>91</sup> He provides the difference between 'Aaron' and 'The Priesthood'. 'The Priesthood' never invokes Christ, and it closes with the speaker lying prostrate before his Maker, waiting for him to revivify his useless clay for the speaker's rather hieratic conception of the priestly task. But 'Aaron' installs Christ at the centre, redefining the hieratic duties of the priesthood as pastoral tasks. In this, as Strier's quotation puts it, Christ works gently through "Incarnation rather than power and skill". His servants are not divinely powered automatons, but instead work in indwelling partnership with him. He tunes their "doctrine" (23), provides them with living music (13) and lives in them (24). Although this can be turned into an impregnable system of doctrine, 'Aaron' seems to come out of an experience of pastoral partnership, developed from everyday life.

When the speaker in 'Aaron' refers to Christ as his "onely musick", the prime point of reference is Christ's call to the priestly vocation. Yet 'The Church' also suggests that Christ initiates the poet's musick. Shaw argues that Christ's "onely musick" must refer "as much to Herbert's poetic as to his priestly performance", because only such a reading allows the reader to "grasp the full import of the poem's aural artistry".<sup>92</sup> By using the same rhyme words throughout the poem, that artistry displays "human frailty" as it is transfigured by "the substantial presence of Christ". Thus the poem's final invitation, "Come people", extends, as Shaw points out,

beyond the priest's congregation to the poet's readers, all of whom are urged to look on Aaron's vestments, to enjoy the manifestation of Christ which the completed poem with its harmonious form and meaning can now afford.<sup>93</sup>

In its invitation, the poem makes no final separation between its priestly and its poetic work. Since "all the members of Christ's Body find their voices in the Head",<sup>94</sup> Herbert

<sup>90</sup> Strier (1983), p. 129. Compare also Singleton, p. 156: "The fourth stanza [declares] the complete coherence of Christ with Herbert (that fits this "poor priest" to become a true Aaron.)"

<sup>91</sup> Strier (1983), p. 130, Galatians 3.27, Romans 13.14.

<sup>92</sup> Shaw, p. 95.

<sup>93</sup> Shaw, p. 96.



receives from Christ, not just a priestly voice, but also a poetic voice and a voice of song. "[T]he source of his music" throughout 'The Church' is, as Veith writes, "Christ, crucified".<sup>95</sup> In 'Easter', the music's source is Christ triumphantly resurrected. There, the speaker orders "both heart and lute" to consort "and twist a song" (13), before launching into a poem-song which celebrates Christ's resurrection ("I got me flowers to straw thy way" (19)).<sup>96</sup> The sweet singer of *The Temple* is always inspired by his love for Christ.

Yet Christ influences the "musick" of 'The Church' not just as a source of inspiration. On occasion, Herbert claims that Christ intervenes directly into the process of poetic composition. Thus in 'A True Hymne', as Chapter Three mentioned, Herbert claims that God completes the writing process in proportion to the poet's devotion. When "th' heart" is moved, then even if "the verse be somewhat scant", God "doth supplie the want" (16-18), actually taking over the writing of the poem:

As when th' heart sayes (sighing to be approved)  
O, could I love! and stops: God writeth, *Loved*. (19-20)

There is little here to suggest that this is Christ's writing rather than the Father's. Yet Asals argues that, throughout Herbert's poetry, God's writing on the believer's heart always involves an appeal to Christ's cross.<sup>97</sup> In 'A True Hymne', so Asals suggests, Herbert accepts that his writing traces the inky blood in which Christ has written before him.<sup>98</sup> Christ is the original and master poet, whose writing has primal power to overwrite the law and even "to write in stone", the stone of the sinner's heart ('The Sinner' (14)). Thus the poet of the new covenant follows Christ's lead, watching him, as in all things, begin and complete the poetic act.

<sup>95</sup> Heather Asals, "The Voice of George Herbert's 'The Church'", in *Essential Articles for the Study of George Herbert's Poetry*, pp. 393-407 (p. 397).

<sup>96</sup> Veith, p. 72.

<sup>97</sup> Mario A. Di Cesare (*George Herbert: The Temple. A Diplomatic Edition of the Bodleian Manuscript* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1995) argues that this poem-song should in fact be counted as a separate poem (pp. lv-lvii).

<sup>98</sup> Asals (1981), pp. 18ff. For this argument, Asals appeals to, among others, 'The Thanksgiving' ("How then shall I . . . Copie thy fair, though bloudie hand?" (15-16)), 'Assurance' ("Thou didst at once thy self indite,/And hold my hand, while I did write" (29-30)), and 'Good Friday' ("bloud is fittest, Lord, to write/Thy sorrows in . . ." (21-22)). Thus, "Poetry is an efficacious sign of Christ's victory on the Cross and is, as such, a rewriting of the former handwriting 'which is against us', the writing of the law (22). Asals could here, but does not, appeal to Hebrews 8.10 and Hebrews 10.16, verses which regard the prophecy of Jeremiah 31.33 ("I will . . . write [my law] in their hearts") as fulfilled through Christ.

<sup>99</sup> Asals (1981), p. 24.

That Christ calls into being the poet's vocation is most obvious in 'Jordan' (2), where in his guise of itinerant friend, Christ issues the poet with writing orders. Supplanting the role occupied by Sidney's Muse (as Chapter Three showed) Christ whispers to the poet:

*There is in love a sweetness readie penn'd:  
 Copie out onely that, and save expense.* (17-18)

The import of these cryptic words is much debated, especially whether they propose a creative or a mimetic aesthetic.<sup>99</sup> Yet it is clear in either case that the poet's novel writing instructions come from Christ. He, as Harman says, "recommends that the speaker give himself over to writing in a completely different way",<sup>100</sup> which avoids the perils of self-aggrandisement. By acting under Christ's orders and copying his example, a poet takes the first necessary steps on the road to poetic self-humiliation. Harman considers that Herbert fails here because although "a new kind of writing is indicated in the final lines" of 'Jordan' (2), it can never be actualised.<sup>101</sup> Perhaps not, yet under Christ, the posthumously published *Temple* presents the closes possible approximation to this standard without actually being holy writ. Indeed as Asals argues, writing conducted under Christ gains all manner of revivifying possibilities and need no longer be linked to the death-boding tables of the law. Instead, Asals suggests that the poet can now lay "claim to the merits and example of Christ by . . . copying *his* writing", writing which undoes the effects of sin.<sup>102</sup> For poetry must continue — Christ has commanded it — but it must continue in line with his instructions. Copying Christ's story, copying the sweetness ready penned in love, involves grafting one's own story onto the biblical story, in line with the observations of 'The Holy Scriptures' (2). It involves striving to write in the tracks of Christ's writing and so to establish a poetics which does not exalt the poet's work but the work of the Maker of makers, Christ. It means copying Christ's actions in and into one's liturgy, life and art, living out life as what St Paul calls a "letter of Christ", written "with the Spirit . . . on tablets of human hearts".<sup>103</sup> For the priest-poet also, it means sharing this humble example with others. Herbert is comfortable enough with his place in the biblical story to know that this applies as much to his poetry as to his priesthood.

Summers suggests that, for Herbert, copying the "sweetness readie penned" involves recalling "the notions and metaphors" by which God has manifested his love in the

<sup>99</sup> e.g. Harman, pp. 47-48.

<sup>100</sup> Harman, p. 47.

<sup>101</sup> Harman, p. 48.

<sup>102</sup> Asals (1981), p. 23.

<sup>103</sup> 2 Corinthians 3.3 (NRSV).

world.<sup>104</sup> This suggests the recollecting *anamnesis* which the priest performs in the eucharist, but it also brings to mind the example of Christ which believers are urged to copy in 1 Peter 2.21: "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps". Cunningham points out that "example" here translates the Greek *hupogrammos*, an "exemplary line of textual stuff written out by Greek pedagogues at the top of the schoolboy's wax writing tablet to provide him with copy for handwriting practice".<sup>105</sup> If Summers' intuition is mingled with Cunningham's observation, then both poet and priest are called to a sacramental recollection and copying of Christ, the supreme example of God's love in the world.<sup>106</sup> Of course, as seen throughout this chapter (and indeed this thesis), copying Christ is often a disorientating experience, for to follow the King of grief and the King of glory is to invite uncertainty. Yet, as if in recognition of this, Cunningham observes that the *hupogrammos* "commonly contained nonsense words".<sup>107</sup> On one hand, therefore, Christ allows Herbert to identify with God, and calls him to the work of poetry and priesthood which he then enables him to perform. In Christ, a complete alternative orientation is available for those who follow him. Yet concurrently, Christ is, like the *hupogrammos*, perplexing and bewildering. Thus a poetry that copies his example is a poetry of both grief and joy. Christ calls the poet to copy him by writing in ink of blood and notes of joyful song. He calls the priest to call others to experience this writing for themselves. With no scholastic system to uphold, Herbert is secure to follow Christ in story and liturgical performance, celebrating and puzzling over what he sees.

### *Thomas — the signpost that points in different directions*

Although located in the same Anglican liturgical tradition as Herbert, R.S. Thomas does not share Herbert's assurance that Christ goes before him in his vocations. He experiences Herbert's bewilderment without his secure sense of purpose. Partly, this is due to the changes wrought by Romanticism in the intervening centuries. Where Hopkins reacted decisively against the legacy of Romanticism,<sup>108</sup> Thomas wanders wistfully among its ruins. Wistfully, because, Romanticism's elevation of the individual means that Thomas can no longer return to Herbert's confident security in Christ. Unable to comprehend the uniqueness of Christ, Romanticism questions any concept of Christ's headship over the Christian body, the arrangement so important to Herbert's conviction that Christ calls

<sup>104</sup> Summers, p. 111.

<sup>105</sup> Cunningham, p. 401.

<sup>106</sup> Shaw, p. 95, argues that "Poetry and the priesthood harmonize . . . in . . . being sacramental activities".

<sup>107</sup> Cunningham, p. 401.

<sup>108</sup> Compare Downes (1983), p. 99.

forth his vocations. Thus, while the forms of Herbert's pastoral ministry remain, Thomas does not have Herbert's confidence that his vocations work for the good of the Christian body under Christ. Hopkins' reaction to this problem threatened to turn Christ into a disembodied principle above Romantic suspicion, but Thomas ponders whether Christ has any positive value for humanity at all. Nonetheless, Thomas remains haunted by the possibility that Christ does in some sense fulfil the priest's hope and answer the poet's questions. In the end, his various portrayals of Christ give no definitive answer to this hope, but they lead readers to the cross to decide for themselves whether God is present in human suffering.

Yet this remains up to the reader. Different poems offer different perspectives on Christ's mystery and in both poetry and prose, Thomas' restlessness towards the strictures of credal belief issues in an impatience with "high" Christologies. To him, "any form of orthodoxy is just not part of a poet's province at all".<sup>109</sup> "I find difficulty with Christology," he remarks in an interview where he sympathises with Taoist, Hindu and Zen Buddhist spiritualities: "How can one be dogmatic about Christ?"<sup>110</sup> This eclectic spirituality, typical of his age, is far from Herbert's fidelity to the biblical story and far from Hopkins' desperate attempts to erect a Christian bulwark against Romantic individualism. Nevertheless, Thomas' fascination with the figure of Christ persists to arrest any slide into pantheism or Deism. Thus, alongside the admission that he finds "difficulty with Christology", Thomas still believes that the theological equation must include Christ:

"What think you of Christ?" has been a key question for two thousand years. At times his divinity, in its unique sense, seems to me a product of the mythopoeic imagination. At others, the Trinitarian doctrine seems best to do justice to the mystery of personality or the divine economy. But what I reject is deism, understood as the belief in a God who once made the world, and then left it to run by itself, like a self-correcting machine . . .<sup>111</sup>

Thomas' poetry cannot evade the symbolic figures of Christ's bread and wine and the tree of his cross. It returns to them to signal God's presence or to question his absence. Some key mythic poems focus on Christ as they probe the hypothesis of God thus challenging readers, as Shepherd describes the general strategy of the mythic poems, "to define God for themselves".<sup>112</sup> All Thomas' various poetic presentations of Christ fit within this strategy. Christ for Thomas is a mystery and his cross a signpost that points in different

<sup>109</sup> Ormond, p. 53.

<sup>110</sup> Ned Thomas and John Barnie, 'Probings', pp. 38, 39-40. Compare also Thomas' sympathies for Eastern philosophy in 'Unity', pp. 147, 153; Wintle, p. 30. For eastern influences in his poetry, see 'Amen' (from *Pieta* not *Laboratories of the Spirit*), where "Accept; accept" is the message of the "cold landscape"; 'First Person' which views sin and pain as "the penalties/of division, a surrender to the belief/that we are not whole".

<sup>111</sup> Thomas and Barnie, 'Probings', p. 39.

directions. Through his different portrayals of Christ, Thomas' poetry presents these different directions, challenging the reader with certain fundamental alternatives about God.<sup>113</sup> None of these signposted directions gives Thomas unambiguous vocational certainty, yet when he ventures into the territory of suffering and despair, he discovers that the cross is there before him. His poetry and his priesthood follow its directions in questing for knowledge of God.

Perhaps because of his inclination to Romanticism, overt Christological reference is rare in Thomas' earliest work.<sup>114</sup> As Lynch indicates, Christ's particularity will always scandalise the Romantic imagination,<sup>115</sup> a fact which prompted the great Romantics to seek substitute Christ-figures in Prometheus and Hyperion.<sup>116</sup> Thomas displays a simultaneous attraction and repulsion to Christ, perhaps due to his Romantic inclinations. There are echoes here of his reaction to the peasants' nature spirituality in Chapter Two. Sometimes, the peasants seem to usurp Christ's salvific role, as in 'The Gap in the Hedge', where Prytherch appears like Christ on the cross, "framed" between two trees, with his sharp eyes "Bright as thorns" (4).<sup>117</sup> In 'Absolution', Prytherch, enveloped in "the earth's incense" (10) and presiding over an altar of stone, becomes the Melchizedek of the fields, issuing priestly absolution to the speaker. But 'Absolution' deals in the elemental Romantic language of earth, stone, wind and fields,<sup>118</sup> returning Christian iconography to pagan or perhaps pantheist purposes which has little to do with Christ.

Despite the attraction of Prytherch's primitive, pseudo-Christly ministry, however, Thomas is never totally seduced by peasant spirituality. One strand in Thomas' poems concludes with 'Autumn on the Land' that "earth/Has of itself no power to make men wise" (14-

<sup>112</sup> Shepherd, p. 6.

<sup>113</sup> Compare Tony Conran's general comment that "the sudden proliferation of different perspectives and points of view" save Thomas' poetry from "the dead weight of empiricism" (*Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. 198).

<sup>114</sup> "I am a Romantic", quoted in Wintle, p. 29. Compare also the verdicts of Wintle "quintessentially Romantic" (p. 123); Tony Brown, p. 186; Ned Thomas, 'Introduction' to R.S. Thomas, *Selected Prose*, pp. 7-16, (p. 9): "a new and fresh Romanticism, founded in *this* place and welling up in the heart . . ."; Anne Stevenson, p. 41: "a precarious and increasingly self-conscious, self-critical Romantic"; Randal Jenkins, 'R.S. Thomas: Occasional Prose', in *Critical Writings on R.S. Thomas*, pp. 46-61 (p. 46).

<sup>115</sup> Lynch, p. 190.

<sup>116</sup> Coleridge is perhaps an exception, and in some ways, Thomas' dilemma mirrors that of Coleridge who, though committed to Romanticism, continued to feel "the want, the necessity, of religious support". This is in contrast to Wordsworth felt no need of a Redeemer: see David Jasper, *The Sacred and the Secular Canon in Romanticism: Preserving the Sacred Truths*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 31, 33-35, 38; S.T. Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, ed. by H. St. J. Hart, (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1956), p. 39.

<sup>117</sup> See William V. Davis, 'The Verbal Hunger', p. 115, n. 5.

15).<sup>119</sup> Such lines prompt Mathias to the general verdict (with perhaps some overstatement), "that man in isolation has *not* been taught, knows little or nothing of God".<sup>120</sup> The intoxications and consolations of nature spirituality which sufficed for Wordsworth are not enough in Thomas' world where reality is marked by tragedy, foot-rot and indifference. Alternative religious support is necessary. It is thus that, as Chapter Two suggested, Thomas finds strength for ploughing his pastoral field in the example of Christ. 'The Priest' suggests that the priest discovers the way of Christ in his experiences of loneliness and rejection and this is the only way in which his priestly ministry seems to have any purpose. It is similarly in brooding on God's place in suffering that Thomas' key considerations of Christ arise, sometimes issuing in poetry of Christ's suffering way.

Such is the case in 'The Musician', one of the earliest Thomas poems explicitly about Christ. It takes the memory of a violin recital by Kreisler as an occasion for reflecting on God's role in Christ's passion. Kreisler's performance is remembered as an instance of beautiful suffering, which prompts a comparison between the stage and Calvary. The stage lights are compared with "the fiercer light of the thorns' halo" (15), and Kreisler is compared to Christ,

... that one figure,  
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,  
Making such music as lives still.  
And no one daring to interrupt  
Because it was himself that he played  
And closer than all of them the God listened. (16-21)

Phillips objects that this comparison falsifies in its "effort to achieve an effect", because many attempted to interrupt Christ's "music" and "the silence of the believers was one of dismay, not of awe".<sup>121</sup> Yet if 'The Musician' is read as a proto-mythical poem, Phillips' objection fades. As in 'Pietà', which portrays Christ's Deposition as an eternal work of art, 'The Musician' detaches the crucifixion from its historical context to meditate on God's attitude to human pain.<sup>122</sup> The cross is a continual puzzle, like an art work to which the beholder must surrender repeatedly. Yet this does not mean that its perspective offers

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<sup>118</sup> Shepherd, p. 134, observing that the solid language of such poems is closer "to Wordsworth than Hopkins".

<sup>119</sup> 'Autumn on the Land'. Compare 'This' which admits that "the thoughts hopefully sown" in the mind of the farmer "never could break/The mind's crust" (9-11).

<sup>120</sup> Roland Mathias, 'Philosophy and Religion in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas', in *Critical Writings on R.S. Thomas*, pp. 62-82 (p. 70).

<sup>121</sup> D.Z. Phillips, pp. 45-46. According to Walford Davies, 'Bright Fields', p. 208, n. 51, Thomas omitted 'The Musician' from *Selected Poems 1946-1968* for this reason, although it appears in *Collected Poems 1945-1990*.

<sup>122</sup> Walford Davies (p. 187), focusing on the word "still" in line 18, compares the stillness of T.S. Eliot's ming vase in 'Burnt Norton' V, and the "still untravish'd bride of quietness" on Keats' Grecian Urn.

hope. By deliberately occluding the relationship between Christ and God, it suggests little about Christ other than that his suffering represents all human suffering. Perhaps it drifts towards an Ebionite position,<sup>123</sup> with its clear distinction between the very human, rather Romantic artist Jesus and "the" God who listens offstage in the wings.<sup>124</sup> God's attention to Christ means that his suffering is presumably very important, but the poem offers nothing other than an aesthetic explanation for it. There is no hint, as there may be in Matthew and Mark, that God has abandoned Christ altogether. Consequently, the poem's crucifixion lacks much sense of universal significance. Its Jesus offers a perpetually suffering example rather than any inkling of redemption. Any hope comes through "the" God's careful interest in the suffering, so that, reading optimistically and against the distance implied by the definite article, God is not impassive, and his attention, "closer" than any human interest, signals utter care and concern for humanity. Swayed by the suffering example of Christ, maybe God will act on humanity's behalf. Maybe; but if Christ is not that intervention, then there is little indication of what this action will involve.

Yet numerous later poems hold out the possibility that the cross might represent God's intervention, whether as cross, signpost, tree or crossbow.<sup>125</sup> In these poems, it becomes an interrogative sign questioning God's place in humanity's suffering. The answer to this question varies according to the position accorded Christ. 'Could Be', for example, seems to share the Ebionite position of 'The Musician' in which Christ is not truly God. Yet where 'The Musician' hints at God's concern for humanity, 'Could Be' charges him with being a malevolent trickster, an adoptionist who has fooled humanity. "You are", the speaker accuses God,

... the ventriloquist  
who once sat Christ  
on your knee and made us imagine  
you were where you were not. (5-8)

With the Incarnation discounted as a deception that tantalises humanity with groundless hopes, 'Could Be' continues its defiant protest by demanding that God prove his goodwill by revealing himself to humanity. Of course, a God who obeys humanity's demands is hardly divine, so that this may be a further instance of the poet's irony. Whether ironic or not, it certainly discounts the idea that Jesus is the true revelation of God and leaves the

<sup>123</sup> Kelly, p. 139: "Ebionism . . . solved the [Christological] problem by denying the divinity altogether".

<sup>124</sup> The mythic poems often refer to "the God", perhaps to enforce the idea that our myths are local.

<sup>125</sup> Among other examples, the cross is referred to as a "crossbow" in 'Sure'; a "tree" in 'The Journey', 'Parry', 'The Coming', 'Amen', 'The Tool', 'The Tree', *Counterpoint* pp. 27, 36, 43, 48; as a signpost in

reader with an Ebionite view of Jesus in which God is merely an impersonal force that moves in the realm of physics, indifferent to humanity.

Yet a more divine Jesus does not necessarily solve this problem, as mythic poems which add Jesus to their exploration of the character of God show.<sup>126</sup> Of the mythic poems that consider Jesus, 'Amen' and 'Rough' sketch a very bleak picture of God. If 'Could Be' suggests that a solely human Jesus is no help to humanity, 'Amen' suggests that a divine Jesus could be antagonistic.<sup>127</sup> The poem begins as an object lesson in predestination:

It was all arranged:  
the virgin with child, the birth  
in Bethlehem, the arid journey uphill  
to Jerusalem. The prophets foretold  
it, the scriptures conditioned him  
to accept it. Judas went to his work  
with his sour kiss; what else  
could he do? (1-8)

There is nothing unduly sinister in this portrayal of Christ's life. But the fatalistic diction ("arranged", "foretold", "conditioned", "accept", "what else") hints at trouble ahead. For the poem goes on to report that Christ's passion displays God's martyr-complex, and that the "salvation" of humanity is "acquired/by an increased guilt" (11-12). Fatalism has here turned into cruelty and the cross is not a sign of God's compassion, but the devious ruse of a manipulative God. Ordinarily (as in 'Prayer', for example), trees in Thomas promise hope and freshness, but this tree, the cross, points to humanity's doom as a species trapped rat-like in the maze of a malicious divine experimenter:

The tree,  
with its roots in the mind's dark,  
was divinely planted, the original fork  
in existence. There is no meaning in life,  
unless men can be found to reject  
love. God needs his martyrdom.  
The mild eyes stare from the Cross  
in perverse triumph. What does he care  
that the people's offerings are so small? (12-20)

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'Directions', 'The Word'; and it is seen in the crossed sticks of the scarecrow in 'West Coast', 'Farming Peter', 'Look Out', 'Come Down'.

<sup>126</sup> Compare 'The Hand', 'The Tool' and 'Rough'. Dyson (1981), p. 312 says of 'Rough' and 'Amen' that they are the two poems in *Laboratories of the Spirit* he "cannot pretend fully to understand". God in 'Rough' is a sadistic scientist experimenting on the humans who form part of his "self-regulating machine", the earth (5). God finds the sufferings of humanity greatly amusing, and it is in God's thunderous laughter that Jesus emerges from God's side "like an incurred stitch" (19). The syntax at that point is ambiguous, making the relationship of Jesus to God unclear, and clouding whether Jesus shares God's vindictive amusement, or whether his association with pain offers some hope to humanity by keeping God accountable. Shepherd, pp. 94-97 and Williams, p. 83 are unsure, while Dyson (1981), p. 315 and Castay, 'The Self and the Other', p. 128 try to wrest some hope from the poem.

<sup>127</sup> 'Amen' differs from the usual mythic poems in that it focuses on the crucifixion, rather than being concerned primarily with the beginning of time. Yet it too presumes access to the interior mind of God.



Dyson doubts that anyone could write "a more effective anti-Christian poem" than this,<sup>128</sup> and indeed, by attributing God's motivation in the Incarnation to spite rather than love, 'Amen' totally confounds the basis of Christian devotion.<sup>129</sup> It challenges the view that God is proved benevolent by Christ's divinity. Quite the contrary: this God's eye view of Jesus shows God becoming incarnate purely for the malicious pleasure he derives in misleading humanity. He in his divinity does not experience the pain of a crucified human being, for the eyes that stare from the cross are "mild". Concurrently, however, although the eyes are God's eyes, they stare in "perverse triumph". This suggests an anthropocentric God, constructed in humanity's own image, who is all too human. Insecure and vindictive, he inspires fear rather than worship, like a projection of the callous and spoilt child within. It is thus that Dyson considers 'Amen' to place its readers "at a cross-roads":

Either you do not come to it, preferring the view of life which bypasses the territory; or you go past it, to join those who kneel in prayer. But you cannot stop here: not unless you think the poem merely a smart joke . . . or unless you feel that it is in fact . . . the way things irrevocably are.<sup>130</sup>

Dyson is right: unless one has abandoned charity and hope, this view of Christ provides no resting place. The fully human Jesus in the gospel looked from the cross in anguished torment, not with the "mild eyes of parody crucifixes in comfortable, uncaring churches".<sup>131</sup> Yet this caricature forces readers to return to the troublesome surface of the gospel story to respond to Christ themselves. A theology built on the mild, uncaring Christ of 'Amen' leads to a view of God as an imperious monster made in the image of his worshippers. Indeed, the Christ of 'Amen' descends from a widespread docetic tendency in would-be orthodoxy which shies away from acknowledging that Christ really suffered,<sup>132</sup> (a tendency seen above even in Hopkins' Christology) and which recoils from accepting that God has become fully human in the fallen world. Perhaps, therefore, 'Amen' lays down a Christological challenge, serving a poetic reminder that theology removes the mystery of Christ at its peril. For the Christ of 'Amen' is ultimately docetic, too clinically divine and impassive to matter or to make sense of the gospel. He is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who drank wine with his friends, wept over his capital city, agonised over his destiny, and suffered unto death. An incarnate God who remains remote and uncaring offers no hope to humanity. If 'The Musician' suggests that a Jesus who is

<sup>128</sup> Dyson (1981), p. 316.

<sup>129</sup> Dyson (1981), p. 316 argues that it presents "the perfection of the theology of divine predestination and total depravity", pushing these ideas to their logical conclusion.

<sup>130</sup> Dyson (1981), pp. 317-318.

<sup>131</sup> Dyson (1981), p. 318.

<sup>132</sup> Leading eventually to the Nestorian heresy. See Kelly, p. 312.

exclusively human can do nothing for humanity, perhaps, in a peculiar way, 'Amen' indicates that an exclusively divine Jesus offers no hope either.

Not that Thomas unquestioningly propagates the Christology of the Nicene Creed. The range of poetic experiment involving Jesus warns readers against any cosy or familiar understandings of the Incarnation. But as Gough points out, it also challenges the idea that God is impossibly remote. Gough argues that the image of the suffering God on the tree "acts as a control" on Thomas' images of God,<sup>133</sup> challenging both the image of the malevolent God of the mythic poems,<sup>134</sup> and the barely apprehensible shadow of divinity that passes briefly through the poems of the *via negativa*, 'Waiting' or 'The Absence'.<sup>135</sup> Gough rather overstates her case, but it is true of many poems that

Christ is the control on the otherwise uncontrolled enormity of the God of the imagination. Any former controls have come only from the limitations of the poet's experience and the carefully defined possibilities of the nature of that God which Thomas has presented. Once he is confronted by the actuality of a person, in the being of Jesus Christ, new limitations and new possibilities are posed by that being, and the Father must be seen through the Son.<sup>136</sup>

In particular, the Father must be seen through the passion of Jesus, for Thomas' poetry only rarely engages with other incidents from the gospels.<sup>137</sup> In Thomas' more orthodox moments, the negative portrayal in 'Rough' or 'Amen' is met with the image of the suffering Jesus which suggests that the cross is an adequate bridge between God and his suffering creation and that it can perhaps atone for the evil in the world. 'Cain' suggests this through the image of the wounded side. The first twelve lines of this difficult poem rework the story of Cain and Abel, with Cain raging against God's refusal to accept his sacrifice of "Clean things",

... the blond hair  
Of the corn; the knuckled vegetables; the  
Flowers; things that did not publish  
Their hurt, that bled  
Silently. . .

(8-12)

The substance of Cain's accusation is that since God has made the blood, he is by implication responsible for the suffering. As a result, Cain wants no part in God's demand for sacrifice. Meilicke, reading within the gnostic tradition where Cain is the hero for

<sup>133</sup> Gough, p. 73

<sup>134</sup> e.g. 'The Island', 'Soliloquy', 'Echoes'.

<sup>135</sup> Even 'Via Negativa', which initially describes God in the language of negation, changes tone in the final lines as God is referred to in personal pronouns and approached through the tender image of Christ's side: "We put our hands in/His side hoping to find/It warm" (10-12). Although God remains outside our understanding (we "miss the reflection" of him in our environment (14)), this modern typology suggests that he can be glimpsed faintly in the passion of Jesus. Compare Shepherd, pp. 154-155.

<sup>136</sup> Gough, p. 76.

<sup>137</sup> e.g.: 'Covenanters', 'Symbols' and 'The Reason' all refer to Jesus' drawing on the ground in John 8.

defying the evil demiurge, argues that the speaker sides with Cain against God, “hold[ing] God guilty and demand[ing] the exculpation of humanity as it is represented by Cain”,<sup>138</sup> Meilicke’s reading makes sense within her own boundaries, but she ignores the poem’s final eight lines where God replies to Cain by looking forward to the cross:

And God said: It was part of myself  
He gave me. The lamb was torn  
From my own side. The limp head,  
The slow fall of red tears — they  
Were like a mirror to me in which I beheld  
My reflection. I anointed myself  
In readiness for the journey  
To the doomed tree you were at work upon. (13-20)

This reply makes Cain’s accusation of God look naïve. When compared with God’s readiness to immerse himself in the suffering of creation, Cain appears like a detached and petty aesthete, whose obsession with cleanliness leads him to thundering accusations and murderous actions (3-7). God’s sorrowful reply, by contrast, is framed with quiet, understated dignity (“And God said. . .”). God meets Cain’s accusations, not with revenge, but with sad resolve, confronting pain and evil with the weapons of suffering and love. Cain’s sacrifice has cost him nothing, so that unlike Abel’s it fails to partake in God’s self-giving, suffering nature. Blood must be shed in love, not anger, if Cain’s evil is to be undone. It is thus that Abel’s lamb is a mirror which, across space and time, reflects back to God the innocent blood of Christ. Even in the face of the many deeds like Cain’s by which humanity is “at work upon” the “doomed tree” of the cross, God is prepared to suffer the ignominy which humanity throws on love, so undoing the worst evil can offer.

‘The Coming’ traces the evil to a different source, but it still elicits God’s compassion. From beyond space and time, Father and Son look out on the same stained world of ‘Cain’, a world of spent promise and decimated beauty, “scorched” and “crusted”, where colour is fierce and light burns rather than heals (5-7). The coiled serpent of evil, “radiant/With slime” (10-11), seems to have grown bright by sucking life from earth. Following this wide angle view of the planet, the second stanza zooms in to focus on the “bare/tree” of the cross that “sadden[s]/The sky” (12-14). The word “bare” hangs prominently at the end of the line, throwing the “crossed/Boughs” (18-19) of the tree into sharp relief, black on white. Joining their silhouette, the emaciated arms of the pitiful people of this planet are stretched out towards the tree, craving release from a world without Spring or resurrection

<sup>138</sup> Christine Meilicke, ‘Dualism and Theodicy in R.S. Thomas’ Poetry’, *Literature and Theology*, 12 (1998) 407-418 (p. 413).

hope, where April has “vanished” (17). It is to them as much as to the Father that the Son’s simple final statement speaks:

Let me go there, he said. (20)

Against the twisting enjambment of the previous lines, these simple words suggest the Son’s resolution. He will take the evil upon himself, heal the people’s sadness and return April to the tree’s crossed boughs, though this mission (in distant recollection of Christ’s words in Herbert’s ‘Redemption’) cost him his life.

When evil is viewed through this lens, humanity cannot hold it against God. Indeed, God might actually be at work through it to reconcile humanity to himself. Such is the implication of ‘Tell Us’, a poem poised always on the edge of denying God’s compassion, but, under the gaze of the cross, never able to do so. It begins almost defiantly as it lists humanity’s names for God,

The Thunderer, the Almighty  
Hunter, Lord of the snowflake  
and the sabre-toothed tiger. (2-4)

The “Thunderer” suggests Zeus, and “the Almighty” the God of the Hebrews. Yet with Thomas’ mastery of line breaks, “the Almighty” becomes the ravenous “Almighty Hunter” rather than a mighty fortress. Yet just as this threatens to deny God’s compassion, the speaker’s defiance immediately breaks down. For the Thundering Almighty is paradoxically Lord of both the soft snowflake and the ferocious tiger. The natural world points to a mysterious divinity of both lightning and love, winter and warm. The mystery is in fact vital. For as ‘The Gap’ and other such poems suggest, to name God definitively is to control him and so to deny his divinity. It is thus right that human names for God fall apart before the mystery of love in a universe of destruction. Astounded by this mystery, the speaker declares that there is “One name we have held back” from God, presumably the name of Love, because it seems irreconcilable with

. . . the mosquito, the tidal-wave,  
the black hole into which  
time will fall. (7-9)

This litany of destruction, both local in the mosquito and cosmic in the black hole, threatens belief in God, certainly in a God of compassion. For a God compatible with these images is beyond love; perhaps beyond good and evil.<sup>139</sup> Yet the poem concludes by

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<sup>139</sup> As is the God of ‘At It’ whose “abstruse/geometry . . . proceeds eternally/in the silence beyond right and wrong” (19-21) — see Chapter Four above.

reflecting again that where God elects to share humanity's pains, moral neutrality vanishes. This is how God answers Cain, the accusing poet and all of suffering humanity:

... You have answered  
us with the image of yourself  
on a hewn tree, suffering  
injustice, pardoning it;  
pointing as though in either  
direction; horrifying us  
with the possibility of dislocation.  
Ah, love, with your arms out  
wide, tell us how much more  
they must still be stretched  
to embrace a universe drawing  
away from us at the speed of light. (9-20)

Like the signpost arms of the cross, these lines point in two directions, challenging the reader to respond to the sign of the cross. On one hand, as God-in-Christ submits to suffer and pardon the wrath of humanity, line 16 bestows on him the name of love refused in line 5. This leaves humanity dislocated, dwarfed by God's loving humility. For the arms on the cross are opened in a loving embrace, demonstrating that, despite the continuation of suffering, God's offer of reconciling love to the world continues in a love which is inseparable from pain.<sup>140</sup> Yet conversely, there is a restlessness in these lines as the universe continues to draw "away from us at the speed of light", with no apparent end to the suffering. In Christ, divine power reappears in the helplessness of infinite love, but love gives the freedom for suffering to continue. Thus, the word "image" in line 10 might suggest some uncertainty on the speaker's part that Christ does answer his complaint. Admittedly, Paul describes Christ as the image of the invisible God in Colossians 1.15, but an image is not always a reality. If Christ is but the image of God, there may again be a suggestion of divine trickery, as in 'Could Be'. The signposts point either towards or away from God's love. The reader must decide.

Dyson summarises these choices in his reading of the enigmatic 'Here'. Although 'Here' never mentions the cross, Dyson proposes that its monologue can be read in two entirely different ways, either as the report of "evolved man, alone in a creation where God is dead", or as the representation "of Christ on the Cross, when God is absent". This powerful juxtaposition prompts Dyson to reflect on the primal power which the cross has to interpret the human condition. He is left wondering whether there is:

<sup>140</sup> 'The Word' uses this image positively. Recalling Eliot and St John of the Cross' insistence that the way up is the way down, it sees the arms of Calvary's signpost pointing "in opposite directions/to bring us in the end/to the same place, so impossible/is it to escape love" (7-10).

something *in* the Cross . . . which by its actual nature bypasses theology and, at the level of language and image, testifies to itself? . . . If the Christian religion has this paradox at its heart, perhaps it is not irrelevant to modern doubt after all, but simply an anticipation of it by 2000 years. And, if the revelation of love is 'Here', where the title directs us, then Christian faith and love have perhaps always been odder than naïve belief, or unbelief, would like to suppose.<sup>141</sup>

"The nails, the Cross, the empty tomb" are the recurring subject matter of Thomas' Christological poems, the "strange enigmas" which point faith towards the true nature of the universe.<sup>142</sup> In the poems of the cross, the reader may sometimes catch the unprovable glimpse that, in Dyson's words, "the ubiquitous Cross is felt *as* a place of healing, after all",<sup>143</sup> and that the inexplicable mystery of life on planet earth is bound up with the necessity of God's suffering. Sometimes, indeed, these glimpses confer the poetic absolution which Williams seeks. For they point to the cross as the sign which closes over the "flaw, 'wound', violence" which Williams argues so often prevents absolution.<sup>144</sup> Alternatively, even if the cross does not quite close the gap, it becomes the only lens through which to focus simultaneously on the disparate strands of human experience. The silence of the night sky and the swell of the sea persuade the poet towards God, even as the cruelty of the elements and the ubiquity of the viruses persuade him otherwise.

. . . the message is always  
in two parts. Must it be  
on a cross it is made one?                      ('Voices' 10-12)<sup>145</sup>

There remains, as Williams identifies, a danger that "the [mere] *articulating* of such a theology . . . risks false and easy closures". Artistic practice demands that there are some things which "must not be said, they must occur, they must surprise and overtake".<sup>146</sup> But sometimes the appearances of the cross and the empty tomb in Thomas have this effect. They become Dyson's "places of healing", visited by the kneeling parson as he stares through the cross or empty tomb (which mix pain and hope) at suffering. At their best, these poems capture at once the suffering of humanity, the terror of the cross and wild belief in the resurrection.<sup>147</sup> 'In Church', for instance, stacks its Christological moment against insurmountable odds. The questioning speaker, seeking the God who hides

<sup>141</sup> Dyson (1981), p. 304.

<sup>142</sup> Dyson (1981), p. 295.

<sup>143</sup> Dyson (1981), p. 299.

<sup>144</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Adult Geometry', pp. 82-98, (p. 96). See above Chapter Four, n. 147.

<sup>145</sup> Compare also, the close of 'Bleak Liturgies' or 'Parry'.

<sup>146</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Adult Geometry', p. 97.

<sup>147</sup> e.g. at the ending of 'Sure', the cross is "an old fashioned/weapon", whose bow is drawn "unerringly/against the heart" (5-6, 7-8). 'Directions' ends with "the shadow of the Cross" falling "on the smoothest of surfaces", causing the speaker "to stumble" (compare 1 Corinthians 1.23 and 1 Peter 2.8). Compare also the close of 'Song', where the robin comes into the Christmas scenario like Christ, "in his weakness" (7), but "with a sharp song" (8).

amongst the silences of the church, is confronted by bats, darkness and the advance of shadows. This background makes the quest for traces of God seem hopeless:

There is no other sound  
In the darkness but the sound of a man  
Breathing, testing his faith  
On emptiness, nailing his questions  
One by one to an untenanted cross. (16-20)

Yet at the moment of hopelessness, the word "untenanted" opens a beachhead in the darkness. The cross may be empty because it is meaningless, yet "emptiness" also anticipates the empty tomb, and the present participles and repetitions lead the sentence to the hope that the cross is untenanted because the resurrected Christ has departed the empty tomb. Either possibility stands,<sup>148</sup> for the message is always in two parts; the signposts always lead in two directions. The old questions may point in the wrong direction towards despair ("The Answer"), while the enigma of the resurrection points the way of love.

There are, in 'Thomas' treatment of the choices which Christ and the cross present to the reader, echoes from the previous chapter of the options proclaimed by the poet-prophet. Sometimes, the priest-poet enlists Christ as his ally in opposing society's spiritual death wish and its obsession with technology and hopes that the prophetic alternative of unity and wholeness can come through the cross. Indeed, in those poems where Christ becomes the prophet's ally, a tone of triumphant denunciation often replaces the usual ambiguities. Thus, as quoted in Chapter One, the speaker of one defiant poem from *The Echoes Return Slow* denounces the scientists by putting a cross "at the bottom/of the working out of their problems/to prove to them that they were wrong" (19-21).<sup>149</sup> *Counterpoint*, likewise, sets "salvation history against science"<sup>150</sup> and one of its key sequences mocks the way that technology has replaced religion in contemporary culture. It begins by imagining a Nativity where the manger contains the machine rather than the Christ-child. The magi come to a "workshop" rather than a stable and they have nothing to worship, for the child's halo is of "molecules and electrons" and the uncertain cry of "Holy. Holy. Holy?" comes not from Isaiah's angels, but from a voice of hoarse metal.<sup>151</sup> The grim parody proceeds through Christ's life until the crucifixion where, because the machine's kingdom is "all of this

<sup>148</sup> Compare Winkle, p. 294: "the untenanted cross is compounded equally . . . of resistance and grace". Compare also "The Answer", discussed briefly in Chapter Four at n. 140.

<sup>149</sup> *Echoes*, p. 89. Compare *Counterpoint*, p. 34, where the speaker is caught in history's examination with "a crib" up his sleeve. "Crib" suggests Christ's manger and a cheat sheet. See Volk-Birke, p. 213.

<sup>150</sup> Shepherd, p. 166. The volume also counterpoints love and truth, observation and revelation (157), "evolutionary history and salvation history" (164).

<sup>151</sup> *Counterpoint*, pp. 24-25. See Shepherd's helpful discussion, p. 165.

world", its cross (fabricated from "rod" and "crankshaft") has "no power/to atone". Its materialist universe is without hope of resurrection so that the "third day" of burial turns into "a third year", and all the time "the sepulchre/filled up with humanity's bones". The machine can only kill and destroy. Of course, this does not of itself prove that the cross of Jesus provides a place of healing, but for the prophet, it is decidedly more appealing than the alternative crosses found in *Counterpoint*. They are either the funeral crosses "of remorse", signs of a dying species which has missed the right way,<sup>152</sup> or they are construction cranes, monuments to blind material progress:

On the skyline I have seen gantries  
with their arms out awkwardly  
as love and money trying to be reconciled.<sup>153</sup>

This embrace has nothing in common with the embrace of 'Tell Us'. Its clumsy attempt to combine love and money can only issue in ugly compromise. Worship of progress has driven the true cross from humanity's horizon, and hope has gone with it.

Christ's cross also confounds Deists and materialists, as the long poems 'Bleak Liturgies' and 'Incarnations' show. 'Bleak Liturgies' insists that "when the computers that are our spies/have opened to us from inside", they will show that God "is not there". Instead, those who have struggled with him "in the small hours" have found

... as the day dawned,  
his body hanging upon the crossed tree  
of man, as though he were man, too. (129-143)

The prophetic air in these poems is found in the way they judge what 'Incarnations' regards as prosaic human dreamlessness.<sup>154</sup> Those who follow the prophet's alternative way, however, find God's body "hanging on the crossed tree/of man". For such people, "the symbol of the Cross", as Nichols says, "becomes the source of a strange kind of grace".<sup>155</sup> Not that the prophet concerns himself with doctrinal specifics. Christ retains his enigmatic status. Yet where the cross is present it hopes against hope for the resurrection, for the alternative reality promised by the simplicity of bread and wine. Although "We have overfurnished/our faith" (our churches are like "limousines in the procession/towards heaven"), still,

<sup>152</sup> *Counterpoint*, p. 36. See Shepherd, p. 172.

<sup>153</sup> 'Fair Day' also draws on the imagery of gantries. Compare also 'Symbols', 'What Then?'

<sup>154</sup> Compare 'Incarnations' (51ff), which concludes: "I have said to the future: 'Show me the dreamless man,/the prose man, the man imprisoned/by his horizons.' And the machine/stalled at an abyss, empty/as the tomb in Palestine,/the eternal afterdraught of the bone's dream." (69-75) Note the pun on "stalled".

<sup>155</sup> Kevin Nichols, 'Untenanted Cross' in *Three Contemporary Poets: Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes & R.S. Thomas*, ed. by A.E. Dyson (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 222-228 (p. 228).



... the verities  
 remain: a de-nuclearised  
 cross, uncontaminated  
 by our coinage; the chalice's  
 ichor; and one crumb of bread  
 on the tongue for the bird-like  
 intelligence to be made tame by. (*Counterpoint*, p. 37 (9-18)).

There are echoes here of the prophet's alternative kingdom vision from Chapter Four. Indeed, if we "Look long enough", the cross puts on leaves, the thorns become flowers and the route to eternity opens in the here and now (3-8). When the poet takes on Christ's symbols of chalice, bread and cross, he challenges the materialism of contemporary religious practice and the nuclear proliferation of modern civilisation, opposing them with austere, unfurnished simplicity, de-nuclearised divine peace and the humble acceptance of suffering. Of course, sufficient ambiguity remains for the person of reason to reject the prophet's message. Few people might wish their intelligence to become "tame", and "ichor" can be either a god's blood or a pussy ulcerous discharge. The choice lies with the readers, and the priest-poet can but court their responses, encouraging them to look and kneel long enough for tameness to become peace, for pus to become wine and for faith to be stirred. The end of *Counterpoint* draws on the banquet imagery of Herbert's 'Love' (3) to intimate such moments of feasting with God:<sup>156</sup>

... When we are poor  
 and aware of the inadequacy  
 of our table, it is to that  
 uninvited the guest comes. (5-8)

Christ the guest comes here as God so often comes in Thomas, "uninvited", as "a shadow", a distant light, a moving curtain, "an echo of what the light said", "sunlight quivering/on a bare wall", a "breath clouding/[a] looking glass".<sup>157</sup> Here at least, the uninvited Christ appears to be one with the incomprehensible, often absent God of much of Thomas' poetry. For he is rarely present in the poems that bare his mark.<sup>158</sup> He is the fast God who has already departed the untenanted cross and the empty tomb. "His are the echoes/We follow, the footprints he has just/Left", as 'Via Negativa' puts it (8-10). It is for patient believers to wait with the priest-poet on their knees, believing that when Christ's staggering and mystifying presence comes, it comes with divine love and with Nichols' "strange kind of grace", even amidst the cross' bleakness and trials. In such moments, Nichols continues, Thomas "succeeds in enfolding the bleak human condition in a blanket

<sup>156</sup> *Counterpoint*, p. 62, which is the penultimate poem in the book, although Volk-Birke points out (p. 225) that, together with the facing poem on p. 63, it is the octet to that poem's sonnet.

<sup>157</sup> Quotations from 'The Film of God', 'This One', 'Folk Tale', 'Coming', 'The Presence', 'Perhaps'.

of compassion and prayerfulness" so that it is through Christ's cross that Thomas' "true (though not obvious) success as a man, a priest and a poet flow together".<sup>159</sup> Through the cross, both poet and priest are offered (so that they in turn can offer) grace in response to the pain of the world.

In Thomas' view, this finally allies his poetry with the priest's sacramental duties. Certainly he sees his poetry in sacramental terms, and when one considers that the poet's task involves plumbing the depths of human suffering and despair, something Christ has done before the poet, the eucharistic sacrament is perhaps the ideal analogue for poetry which seeks to dredge up grace from despair. Thomas comments:

My work as a poet has to deal with the presentation of imaginative truth. Christianity also seems to me to be a presentation of imaginative truth . . . As a priest I am committed to the ministry of the word and the ministry of the sacraments. Well, word is metaphor, language is sacrament, sacrament is language . . .<sup>160</sup>

In his view, ultimate reality can only be presented through metaphor, which unites the Christian witness of word and sacrament with the poetic task. Thus as "Christ was a poet" and "the New Testament . . . a metaphor",<sup>161</sup> Thomas considers that the poet is finally engaged in the same task as the priest, presenting the mystery of ultimate reality to the world, the same mystery that Christ presented. As Dyson says, "The destiny of priest and poet are inseparable",<sup>162</sup> and the destiny of both is to journey to the dark places of mystery and suffering in the footsteps of Christ. Thomas is not dogmatic about Christ, but the little hope which he has to offer in the dark places of experience comes through a vision of the suffering God on the cross. God is generally axiomatic in Thomas' poetry, but only when anchored to the image of Jesus is God anything other than inescapably detached from the human plight. When the priest-poet in turn lives out the way of the cross in his life and poetry, it is then that he challenges the reader to join him against easier, but more destructive, alternatives.

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<sup>158</sup> Exceptions are perhaps found in 'Fugue for Ann Griffiths', lines 141, 193-195, 'Suddenly' and *Counterpoint* p. 33.

<sup>159</sup> Nichols, p. 228, after having quoted 'In Church', 'In a Country Church' and 'The Prayer'.

<sup>160</sup> Ormond, pp. 53-54, whence much of the following is abstracted.

<sup>161</sup> Ormond, p. 53.

<sup>162</sup> Dyson, p. 317.

### *Conclusion — Priesthood, poetry and Christ*

This examination of Thomas' Christology has been necessarily selective and perhaps created too optimistic an impression. Christ comes much more intermittently in Thomas than in Herbert, and when he comes, he is too mysterious to be Thomas' friend. Still, mystery is the common ground to all three priest-poets' portrayals of Christ. When he appears in their work, his paradoxical nature defamiliarises Christian theology and forces the reader to confront the shocking idea of a suffering God. From this confrontation, Herbert issues his readers and his parishioners an invitation to Christ's banquet on Christ's behalf. Thomas is less sure what to do with this defamiliarising picture, yet he too throws the choice back to his readers, even if he has not decided what to do with it (as Herbert surely has). Thomas' poetic-prophetic portrayals of Christ's cross make his readers ponder whether the way of the cross is the route to the wholeness lost on the materialistic way of contemporary civilisation. This route is unpopular, but Thomas has already discovered this in his lonely routine as a priest, lived out under the shadow of the cross. In this, his silent witness to a sacrificial and humble life makes him like the Christ who appears in his poetry, an ambiguous, often rejected figure whose way might just point to the spiritual alternative by which the prophet opposes human materialism.

This tentative language indicates the impossibility of pinning Thomas' poetry down to any particular position on Christ. He appears agnostic, finally, about the details of the connection between Jesus and God (Christianity is, after all, but "a presentation of imaginative truth"),<sup>163</sup> but Christology still seems to offer him a hope at the edge of doubt, a faith salvaged from the wounds in the consciousness of the species. Where Thomas follows Christ, he does so because he recognises that the bleakness in the hearts of all men is matched by the dark moment of death in the Godhead, the "three days and nights/at the back of love's looking-/glass".<sup>164</sup> Thomas' poetry almost never has Herbert's confident joy in the revivifying presence of Christ through his Spirit, but instead presses on through darkness, comforted only occasionally by the confounding mystery of the cross.

In this, Thomas' portrayal of a mysterious Christ has some kinship with Hopkins' ultimate view. Hopkins is forced by his own shattering experience to recognise that Christ's sacrifice is more than simply a doctrine. Instead, it involves utterly human pain that revises

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<sup>163</sup> Ormond, p. 53.

<sup>164</sup> *Counterpoint*, p. 36.

his idea of what God is like and what faith involves. Out of the Gethsemane of the terrible sonnets, Hopkins discovers the validity of all human experience, including human desperation. Christ's presence in the 'Heracleitean Fire' affirms this. The example of the fully human Christ allows Hopkins to find a place for his personal torment in a poetry valuable to God, while the fact that Christ is also fully divine is a promise to him that his torment can be overcome in the resurrection.

This requires a fling of the heart for Hopkins for he wrestles with these questions two centuries after Herbert. Herbert, after all, is absolutely certain that both his poetry and his priesthood are called forth by Christ and sealed by Christ's control amidst the vagaries of the world. Hopkins' certainty is of a more desperate and more vulnerable kind. He is forced to acknowledge that his system is less stable than he might wish, but also that Christ does not depend on the stable systems of his followers. A further century on, Thomas makes no pretence at certainty in an age of indifference. Yet in its varying portraits of Christ, his poetry acts on humanity's illative sense, the intuitive human will to believe, encouraging its readers that Christ's way can lead through faith to hope amidst present perplexity.

There is thus something inherent in his Christological commitment which prevents the priest-poet from joining unreservedly in the Romantic's declaration that "... the true poet has always remained a priest, just as the true priest has always remained a poet".<sup>165</sup> Only where Christ is given due recognition can the poet-priest make this equation, and this is true in different ways for each of the three poet-priests. It is easiest for Herbert in his age of faith, for Christ summons him to both his poetic song and his priestly ministry. Yet Hopkins, too, willing to serve Christ in his priestly tasks, discovers that Christ might be present in the depth of the apparent clash between his two vocations. Whether he sustains that discovery is unclear — he is never fully comfortable with the terrible sonnets — but out of it, he launches his final declaration of hope in the resurrection. And Thomas, despite doubts, anger and Romantic affinities, sees in the cross the ideal of unity to which both his vocations finally aspire. This is a struggle for him, but if Christ struggled with his God-ordained tasks, it is inevitable that his followers will struggle also. For, the idea of vocation may finally bring the priest-poet and his exemplar Christ together in surprising ways. Wright proposes that Jesus' knowledge that he was God may have been like an

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<sup>165</sup> Novalis, quoted in Jasper (1999), p. 30.

awareness of vocation, "like knowing one is loved". This is not something one can ever prove, "except by living it".<sup>166</sup> The priest-poets' vocational experiences are perhaps analogous to this. In the eyes of the world their combination of vocations is unlikely, even impossible. Yet in living out the combination of vocations, embodying in poetry the tense way of the cross, though with inevitable differences of emphasis, they find a place as ministers of Christ in a world of uncertainty and flux. Where the priest's theology can too easily straitjacket Christological understanding, poetry, open to incoherence and contingency, portrays the disorientating paradoxes Christ poses; the paradox where death meets resurrection. When living in the tension between their priestly and poetic vocations, thereby declaring to readers and parishioners in life and in poetry that this is possible, the priest-poets are surprisingly following Christ's way, a way that combines impossible roles and leads through suffering to hope.

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<sup>166</sup> N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 653. Wright continues that Jesus' "messianic vocation included within it the vocation to attempt certain tasks which, according to scripture, YHWH had reserved for himself . . . As part of his human vocation, grasped in faith, sustained in prayer, tested in confrontation, agonized over in further prayer and doubt, and implemented in action, he believed he had to do and be, for Israel and the world, that which according to scripture only YHWH himself could do and be. He was Israel's Messiah; but there would, in the end, be 'no king but God'."

## Chapter Six — Conclusion: Fools for Christ's Sake

Resign yourself to the fool you are . . .<sup>1</sup>

### *Fools for Christ's sake*

The preceding chapters have treated Herbert, Hopkins and Thomas as exponents of a tradition of priest-poets. Yet differences between them have been obvious throughout, making it clear that the tradition is far from monolithic. In particular, the decline of Western Christianity influences their work and unsettles their vocational certainty. This was evident in the R.S. Thomas poem 'Resurrections' which surveyed a tradition marked increasingly by decay and spiritual uncertainty as time passed. Thus, while Herbert presumes a largely believing audience for the pastoral lessons he dispenses in his poetry, Hopkins writes in an age of doubt, attempting desperately to provide a theological scheme safe from the incursions of unbelief. The following century, however, finds Thomas struggling to be heard in an age of indifference, struggling too with the purpose of his own priestly vocation. It is a long slide from Herbert's assurance that someone must perform the teaching, pastoral and eucharistic functions of the priest (even if he is unworthy of the task), through to Thomas' doubts about why he persists in them. Hopkins' Catholic conviction about the priest's role seems to place it outside the doubts that afflict Thomas, but even the impregnable world-view he attempts to construct is vulnerable to the absence which characterises the nineteenth century, leaving "love guttering/in his withdrawal", resurrecting the "ghouls/and the demons we thought/we had buried for ever".

These words show Thomas' consciousness that the world where he lives out his vocations as the last in a line of priest-poets is characterised by incoherence. Herbert's poetry, though for rather different reasons, proposes a similar picture. His Reformed theology stresses God's otherness from humanity and considers sin to sever the proper relationship between them. Only God's gracious intervention, through Christ's sacrificial and redeeming death, overcomes this infinite disparity and restores humanity to a useful function in God's order. In Christ, even though beset by unhinging doubts and afflictions, Herbert can work as a priest and produce a poetry of remarkable coherence. Full coherence, Herbert believes, will only be known in an eschatological realisation of complete order, but until then, Christ reorganises the anarchy, completes the poetry and gives the priest a ministry to fulfil, in counterpoint to the sinful disorder of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*, I.1

By contrast with this Reformation stress on the disjunction between God and humanity, Hopkins' scholastic theology presumes Christ's incarnating order. In deliberate reaction to nineteenth century nihilism and despair, he asserts that everything in nature reflects Christly coherence and he tries to exercise his poetic and priestly tasks as part of a controlled attempt to live out this alternative, Christ-guaranteed order. This attempt continues until the bafflement of his contradictory experience forces him, near the end of his life, to admit the implications of disorder for all theological schemes. In that admission, his theology meets, for perhaps the first time, the baffling disorder of the cross. There Christ meets the poet in mortality and tension as well as resurrection hope. Like Hopkins, Thomas knows fracture and uncertainty, but he sees little possibility of fighting against it. In his world, "Religion is over", and "Literature is on the way/out",<sup>2</sup> so that, for him, Herbert's assured theological repose in the incoherence and Hopkins' desperate response to it are equally impossible. All the same, despite his unanswered questions, Thomas maintains his priesthood of humble brokenness. Here the Christian iconography of his commitment informs a poetry of multiple perspectives. One of these perspectives holds out to the reader the possibility that coherence can be found by stepping aside into faith, kneeling before the cross that unites the disparate strands of human experience.

Thus despite their different eras and their differences in temperament and personality, their presence in this decaying tradition casts a strange unity over Thomas, Herbert and Hopkins' work. All three of them have had to grapple with being committed to the two vocations of priesthood and poetry amidst disorder, threats and uncertainty. They have all grappled with the fact that attempting to fulfil the claims of both vocations seems contradictory when resolute priestly commitment sits uneasily with poetry's elusive honesty and protean refusal to be mastered. Yet at the same time, living in this tension is inevitable, for giving up either vocation is scarcely an option. A vocation is a call, an imperious summons which cannot be refused. In performing the task to which he is called, the recipient of the summons finds that his identity is partly shaped by the call. Thus, because he is called to it, Hopkins cannot cease writing poetry. Similarly, although Thomas' poetic calling leads him to wander far in his report on human pain, yet his priestly calling draws him back to kneel before the cross. All three men must continue both the commitments of their calling, for the commitments are inseparable from who they are.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Moon in Lley'n" (18), "One Life" (12-13).

Perhaps also the priest-poet's inability to abandon either of his vocations suggests a curious relationship between them. This is explicit in Thomas' description of poetry as a means of conveying "ultimate reality".<sup>3</sup> Yet it is also evident in the way that Hopkins and Herbert direct all their poetry towards spiritual ends; Herbert because he sees nothing as secular and Hopkins because he wishes to yoke his poetry into the service of his religious calling.<sup>4</sup> In the priest-poets' poetic ministries, which Chapter Four argues they pursue in three distinct ways, poetry and theology animate one another. Theology is the texture of the priest-poet's poetic recreation of his story, the forge in which his personal poetic responses of faith are hammered out. Theology does not stifle the poetic impulse but gives it material to work on, provoking it into action. Then poetry's "recreative power", its promise of "remaking . . . the world" through "the transforming mystery of words"<sup>5</sup> takes over in poems like 'Love' (3), 'The Kingdom' and 'The Heraclitean Fire' to inspire the hope that theology's promises may be more than mere dogma and words.<sup>6</sup> Their language cannot escape its logocentric roots. For in the priest-poet's experience, language is as Edwards describes it, "big with metaphysical activity",<sup>7</sup> even, as Cunningham insists, theological activity. The "logocentrism" which haunts the tradition of Graeco-Christian metaphysics is also a "theologocentrism".<sup>8</sup> Theology and literature cannot leave one another alone. Language plays amidst the rubble of metaphysical, even theological thinking, because the priest-poet knows nowhere else for it to play. Like positive and negative theology, metaphysics and deconstruction, religion and poetry must either co-exist in the priest-poet's writings or not exist at all.<sup>9</sup> There will always be a tension between the poetic and the rabbinic, between, that is, "the interpreter who seeks final signifieds and original truths" and "the interpreter who eschews final truths for mere delight in the play of signifiers."<sup>10</sup> This tension is an inevitable part of the nature of language, so that it is insufficient to install one discipline above the other. Interpretation demands "that there will always be rabbis and poets".<sup>11</sup> The strands of poetry and theology, the two tendencies of writing and interpretation, wind together like the double helix of an intricately crafted DNA molecule,

<sup>3</sup> Ormond, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> In this connection, compare Conran (1997), p. 90. He argues that Hopkins found inspiration for his mode of address to God in 'The Deutschland' in the poetic "boasts" of the Welsh bards.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Edwards, *Towards A Christian Poetics* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 146.

<sup>6</sup> Compare Cunningham, p. 402: "Theology needs the reminders of deconstruction as much as deconstruction depends on theology's".

<sup>7</sup> Edwards, p. 147.

<sup>8</sup> Cunningham, p. 363.

<sup>9</sup> Compare Kevin Hart's *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), throughout, e.g., p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Cunningham, p. 394.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book', in *Writing and Difference*, transl. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 64-78 (p. 67). Cunningham also quotes this at p. 394.



stretching before and behind in an infinite quest to depict the soul's interaction and encounter with God.

The previous chapter suggested that there is in this impossible combination of qualities some analogy with the credal assertion that Christ is true God and true man, just as he is master and servant (John 13), Lion and Lamb (Revelation 5.5, 8). This assertion appears ridiculously optimistic or hopelessly foolish, yet despite its apparent naïveté, the Christian experience of the person of Christ has always insisted on just such a foolish accommodation. It is thus that, as the previous chapter noted, Christ the *hypogrammos* is simultaneously "ultimate *telos*, the ground of all meaning", and "self-enclosed, riddling".<sup>12</sup> As human and divine, Christ is the centre of ultimate meaning and ultimate mystery. These impossible combinations cause the human mind to balk at Christ who, as Lynch points out, is an "irrational" to the systems of the world, a stumbling block and scandal.<sup>13</sup> Christ turns and breaks the tables, smashes the categories and replaces them with himself. Through Christ, the apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5.18-19, God has effected the reconciliation of humanity to himself. Christ, "[b]y virtue of his full possession of humanity and divinity" mediates between "faith and truth, the temporal and eternal, sinful man and God",<sup>14</sup> even, perhaps between theology and poetry. In Christian experience, this riddling, perplexing and scandalous figure redeems the sundered pairs because all things were created by him and for him and all things have been redeemed by him (Colossians 1.16, 20).

From his experience, St Paul reports that following this scandalous figure means becoming a fool in the eyes of the world (1 Corinthians 4.10), for from a worldly perspective, the way of the cross, with its faith that dislocation and suffering are redemptive, is abject folly (1 Corinthians 1.18ff). It is the folly of Herbert's 'Affliction' poems, Hopkins' terrible sonnets, and Thomas' 'The Priest'. It is folly to attempt amidst loneliness to combine poetry and priesthood, to engage heart, mind and devotion in the living out conflicting callings. Yet in that situation, they can but cling to the hope that although the proclamation of Christ crucified is "unto the Jews a stumbling-block and unto the Greeks foolishness", it is also "the wisdom of God".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cunningham, p. 401, borrowing from 1 Peter 2.21.

<sup>13</sup> Lynch, p. 190 (emphasis added).

<sup>14</sup> Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of St Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 193, summarising the centrality of Christ to Augustine's theology.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Corinthians 1.23, 24.

The notion that true wisdom appears in the guise of folly was also important in the middle ages, and there are interesting similarities between the medieval folly tradition and the activities of the priest-poet. Owing to their apparent folly, both of them occupy an ambiguous social position which allows them to critique the real folly of those around them and therefore to inject the traditions they inhabit with new life.<sup>16</sup> Welsford approves the opinion of a learned Doctor of Auxerre whose explanation for the riotous behaviour of the clergy during the Feast of Fools was that, as "wine barrels break if their bung-holes are not occasionally opened to let in the air", so too the clergy are "nothing but old wine-casks badly put together [who] would certainly burst if the wine of wisdom were allowed to boil by continual devotion to the Divine Service".<sup>17</sup> The clergy needed the riot of celebration. Perhaps this ideal symbiosis between folly and order is similar to the combination of poetry and priesthood that exists in the priest-poet, for in both situations the tension allows for a paradoxical wholeness. Something of this paradoxical wholeness is evident in the "fools for Christ's sake", figures in whom the lessons of the medieval folly tradition take concrete form. These "holy fools" reminded the world of God's true wisdom and of the absurdity of the Christian message.<sup>18</sup> Like the priest-poets, the fools for Christ's sake therefore existed uncomfortably in relation to the structures of the world, and pointed always beyond them. Saward describes them as "men made mad and merry by their faith in a God 'silly in the crib' and 'foolish on the cross', a God whose sage folly alone can save us from the raving lunacy . . . of this age."<sup>19</sup>

Christ's fools directed their critique against both the church and the world, pointing always to God's alternative, Magnificat order. The priest-poet's witness is similar, in that he warns the Church against aridity and the world against the hubris of self-sufficiency. Yet like the fool, he inhabits these worlds at the same time that he critiques them and embodies God's alternative way. The fool succeeds, Welsford argues, when

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<sup>16</sup> Welsford, p. 200, but informative throughout. In the middle ages, court-fools and those elected kings of folly during Carnival season provided an ironic counterpoint to the official structures of authority, particularly religious order. See Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 3; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1968), throughout, especially pp. 10-11. Bakhtin argues that the coexistent tension and co-operation of hierarchical and folk culture released society from autocratic sterility and prevented the reign of chaotic anarchy. Although many religious hierarchs disapproved (many priests and bishops opposed the medieval folly-tradition . . . Welsford, p. 180), the medieval traditions of folly were in fact closely connected with the church.

<sup>17</sup> Welsford, p. 202.

<sup>18</sup> John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 26. Sometimes the fools feigned madness for this purpose; sometimes they were genuinely mad. Compare again 1 Corinthians 1.25: "the foolishness of God is wiser than men".

<sup>19</sup> Saward, p. xi.

... he breaks down the barriers between himself and his patrons so that they too inhabit for the moment a no-man's land between the world of fact and the world of imagination.<sup>20</sup>

His foolish performance "breaks down the distinction both between folly and wisdom, and between life and art".<sup>21</sup> The priest-poet in his own way attempts a similar operation, joining life and art, theological dogma and poetic imagination, fusing brute reality with theological hope, and discovering in the clash some strange knowledge of God. Herbert's poetry, for example, issues its readers an invitation which must be answered outside poetry and outside theological dogma in the personal faith-space beyond, calling readers through poetry to the Christian feast at which Christ the priest presides ("Lord I have invited all,/And I shall/Still invite, still call to thee"<sup>22</sup>). Thomas does not issue his readers with any such authoritative invitation, but his poetry does draw on theological hope and poetic imagination to present the promise of the kingdom as a possible alternative to the folly of his age. Hopkins' poetry draws its readers into the experiences of plenitude and kenosis that following Christ involves and which are pointers to Christ's eucharistic action.

The priest-poet's vocational challenge to theology critiques theology's systematic attempt to reduce faith to a theological system which has minimal contact with the reality of human affliction, terror or doubt. As the representative of poetry, the priest-poet in his folly provokes theology with the reminder that faith is for people, and is not to be confined in systems. This is the argument of Herbert's 'Divinitie'. It is also the argument of Folly in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* who lampoons those who over-analyse faith, distinguish between doctrines of grace and establish elaborate theologies of the eucharist while showing no inclination to practise grace or charity. She lambasts theologians who

are so happy in their self-satisfaction and self-congratulation, and so busy night and day with [their] enjoyable tomfooleries, that they haven't even a spare moment in which to take a single look at the gospel or the letters of Paul.<sup>23</sup>

Folly's mockery re-directs the theologians to the story whence faith grows, not the realm of abstract theologising. In this, the poetry of Thomas, Hopkins and Herbert escapes Folly's censure. In its connection with their personal faith stories and pastoral experiences, difficult and painful though these often are, their poetry avoids the self-satisfaction which Folly attacks. It avoids aridity because it comes from honest attempts to live out the stories and symbols of the foolish faith of Christ. Even Hopkins' most scholastic work flows

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<sup>20</sup> Welsford, pp. 27-28.

<sup>21</sup> Welsford, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> 'The Invitation', lines 31-33.

<sup>23</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. by Betty Radice (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 152-163, quotation from p. 161.

from his experience and represents his desperate search for a system to *live* by. The poets question the theologians' interminable *ideas* about God "crumbled by their dry/minds in the long sentences/of their chapters, gathering dust/in their libraries", criticising those who "cut and carve" the simplicity of faith.<sup>24</sup> They remind the theologian that art responds to the mystery of the ineffable in a way theology cannot. Human knowledge of God, Thomas indicates in 'Emerging', must in some sense "be put together/like a poem or a composition/in music" (8-10).<sup>25</sup> Herbert and Hopkins might be surprised to hear this concept formulated thus, but time and again, the previous chapters have shown their poetry demonstrating it in operation. 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', 'Carrion Comfort' and 'Redemption' all show theology, faith and experience challenging one another and being allowed the soil of drama and story in which to grow. If that adds an air of uncertainty to faith which the analytical theologian disapproves of, it only adds that which life itself provides.

Just as this task is perpetuated by poets who are priests, so too the folly tradition which criticised the church was on occasion carried to the heart of the Christian tradition by clergy. Some popes were devoted to their court fools, while the perpetrators of many of the wildest excesses of the medieval feasts were clerics.<sup>26</sup> They knew, presumably, that the intoxications of folly were necessary for an authentic theology. They knew also, presumably, that by embracing folly, the church could subvert the wisdom of the world. Thus, by analogy, the priest-poet's humble vocational commitment to the priesthood often subverts worldly wisdom in such a way that the worldly wise consider him a fool. Welsford argues that the world of the humanist has no place for the fool, and her reasons for this also consign the priest to the margins. She comments that

the traditional figure of the sage-fool reversing the judgements of the world could not indefinitely provoke the laughter of audiences who tended more and more to regard man as the measure of all things, and self-expression rather than fulfilment of vocation as the proper aim for the individual.<sup>27</sup>

The priest-poets turn this worldly wisdom on its head, living out their vocations in a lost order rather than questing after self-expression for self-expression's sake.<sup>28</sup> Herbert, with his consciousness of God's reversals and of sin, and Hopkins with his attempt to construct an integrated Catholic world-view, poetically embody to their readers ways of living that are

<sup>24</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'The God' (25-30), George Herbert, 'Divinitie' (7).

<sup>25</sup> Compare also 'Neither': "Is it art [interprets God best],/depicting man's figure as the conductor/to your lightning?" (20-22)

<sup>26</sup> Welsford, pp. 14-16 (documenting Leo X's fascination with fools) and p. 203.

<sup>27</sup> Welsford, p. 284.

not the dominant ways of the world. So too does Thomas, even if for different reasons, condemning blindly optimistic views of human progress and staring out into the abysses of space where "man" is clearly not "the measure of all things". In all cases, their faithful fulfilment of the priestly calling invites scorn or suffering. The priest-poet challenges aesthetes, romantics and humanists who would swear allegiance only to beauty, poetic inspiration or humanity. Like the fool, he sits outside fashions and whims, prepared to sacrifice his prospects and his art in response to the calling on his life. Thus Chapters Two and Five have seen 'The Priest' in R.S. Thomas' poem condemned as a consummate fool, a "Crippled soul . . . limping through life/On his prayers". Yet he is content to absorb his critics' taunts. By his silent acceptance of the taunts he challenges the worldly contentment around him. Presumably, such Herbert poems as 'The Quip' draw on similar experience,<sup>29</sup> where the speaker rejects the jeers directed his way by the "train-bands" of the "merrie world". The world's regiments — "chinking" Money, "puffing" Glory, "quick Wit and Conversation" and alluring "Beautie" — seek to entice him away from his allegiance to God. Yet, the speaker stands firm, aware of what he is giving up, but aware also that his true life is hid with Christ (as the poem 'Colossians 3.3' affirms). Similarly, Christ's "hidden life" is important to Hopkins. Christ's example explains Hopkins' reluctance to publish and it underlies his poems in praise of those who only stand and wait ('St Alphonsus Rodriguez'). Hopkins and Thomas are sometimes regarded as quaint for clinging to the theological survivals of a pre-modern age.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps, however, the foolish theological jest of the priest challenges the poetic enterprise to consider whether words are only words, or whether, in fact, the logos is haunted by the Logos.<sup>31</sup>

This double-edged critique of the religious and worldly/poetic traditions opens the priest-poet to derision from all directions, placing him firmly on the fringes. Yet this has positive effects. Welsford comments that the fool, like the poet and the mystic, derives his wisdom and insight from his status as an outsider, for outsiders "see most of the game". Thus she

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<sup>28</sup> This is supremely true of Herbert, and is probably also Hopkins' ideal. It is less true of Thomas, not least because of his attraction to the Romantic heritage.

<sup>29</sup> As also in 'The Crosse', 'The Pearl', 'The Size', 'The Rose', 'Fruitie'.

<sup>30</sup> e.g. Bridges believed that Hopkins' poetry would have benefited were it less theological in content. Martin, p. 258 states that "the religious content" of Hopkins' work "repelled" Bridges. In the introduction to his 1918 edition of Hopkins' poems, Bridges states his dislike of Hopkins' "faults of taste" which, he says, "affect my liking and more repel my sympathy than do all the rude shocks of his purely artistic wantonness". (*Gerard Manley Hopkins: the Critical Heritage*, ed. by Gerald Roberts (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 77-83 (p. 84)). Compare Philip Larkin's comments on R.S. Thomas in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 260 (to Robert Conquest, 26 April 1956), where he calls Thomas "the bible-punching old bastard". Other choice insults and disparaging remarks can be found at pp. 260, 341, 382.

argues that the "fool's resilience" as well as "the poet's genius" and "the mystic's sanctity" all derive from their position as outsiders.<sup>32</sup> Outsiders perhaps suffer the most which gives them, moreover, a vital place in Christ's economy, where the last become first and the meek inherit the earth. There, as Saward writes, "the outsider turns out to be close to the centre; the stylite is in every sense the 'man at the top'".<sup>33</sup> In this, despite the differences between the tradition of the fool and that of the priest-poet, both are ultimately dependent on the strange reversals which Christ brings to the heart of the Godhead, reversals which lead Cox to compare Christ to a harlequin:

Like the jester, Christ defies custom and scorns crowned heads. Like a wandering troubador he has no place to lay his head. Like the clown in the circus parade, he satirizes existing authority by riding into town replete with regal pageantry when he has no earthly power. Like a minstrel, he frequents dinners and parties. At the end he is costumed by his enemies in a mocking caricature of royal paraphernalia. He is crucified amidst sniggers and taunts with a sign over his head that lampoons his laughable claim.<sup>34</sup>

This is not an image readily used by Hopkins or Herbert, but Thomas often describes Christ as the fool or scarecrow,<sup>35</sup> in ways that can sometimes, as Gough observes of 'Court Order', apply to the speaker-poet or to Christ.<sup>36</sup> 'Court Order' is the first person narration of a Christ-like fool, "tumbled" out of the king's presence when challenged to "make some sport/with this word "Love'" (1-7). The poem concludes on "All Fools' Day", with the fool lying bereft "on a hard/shoulder" (8-14), which as Gough points out, could mean he is outcast on the verge of a motorway, or an outcast on the beam of the cross.<sup>37</sup> These twin possibilities sustain the possibility that both the poet-speaker and Christ play the role of the fool. Gough suggests as much in her concluding comments on Thomas' poems of folly, where the mirth which the fool brings to others comes at the cost of suffering to himself. This makes him "a ready-made model for Christ and for man when he shares the suffering", a model which displays a "combination of wisdom and innocence, maturity and the childlike . . . joy and suffering".<sup>38</sup> This describes something of the range of Thomas' poetry, the poetry of the suffering and lonely priest-poet who, though scorned by the

<sup>31</sup> Compare Cunningham, p. 363.

<sup>32</sup> Welsford, p. 319, emphasis added. Compare p. 74: "... the anomalous position of the festival fool, who is so essentially a being apart from his fellows, detached from his surroundings, and yet bears unmistakable traces of ancient sacrificial rites, and appears at times as the central figure of festival performances." Compare also Saward, p. 27: "The fool for Christ is nearly always a stranger or foreigner".

<sup>33</sup> Saward, p. 27.

<sup>34</sup> Cox, pp. 140-141.

<sup>35</sup> Compare the poems cited by Gough at pp. 120ff (including 'Court Order', 'Covenanters', 'Epiphany', 'The Fair', 'Look Out', 'Farming Peter'), and other later poems: *Counterpoint*, pp. 19, 36, 'Come Down', 'Heretics', 'Mischief'.

<sup>36</sup> Gough, p. 122.

<sup>37</sup> Gough, p. 124.

<sup>38</sup> Gough, p. 132.

world, points nevertheless to the alternative, foolish and childlike hope of "Festivals at which the poor man/Is king and the consumptive is/Healed" ("The Kingdom").

The hope manifested in Hopkins' 'Heraclitean Fire' is of a similar order. Downes argues that Hopkins' career should be viewed in tragi-comic terms because it contains simultaneous tragic and comic movements.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the final, laughable movement to resurrection in "The Heraclitean Fire" comes after the acknowledgement of his own folly in my 'My Own Heart', where he identifies himself as a pitiable creature, a "poor Jackself" (9). He is similarly a fool, a "Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch" in 'The Heraclitean Fire' (23). Yet as Ong writes, this utterly honest realisation before God is what faith requires:

... when we are aware of ourselves standing destitute before God, we are close to him, and he is close to us. This is hard, it is frightening, it is tough, and it is at the heart of Christian faith. It is also a declaration of total love. It is the cross on which Jesus died, stripped naked.<sup>40</sup>

The corollary of this in the tragi-comic vision is that, through the hope of resurrection, the one stripped naked discovers that, as well as a joke and a patch, he is also an "immortal diamond" (24). "To the nonbeliever," Downes writes, this is "simply impossible, words, words, words!", but to the Christian fool, mere words are "transferred through grace to *the* Word".<sup>41</sup>

In Herbert's 'The Church', the wisdom of folly is found primarily in Christ. Previous chapters have indicated how, in Herbert's scheme, Christ rejects the decorum of a king, preferring to dwell and die amongst his wastrel subjects. Tuve discerns this mood even in the very serious poem 'The Sacrifice', describing Christ's suffering there as "the awful, heart-rending joker" which confounds human systems and humanity's understanding of what God is like.<sup>42</sup> As indicated in the previous chapters, this is Christ's customary role throughout 'The Church', not least in 'The Bag', where he surrenders his fine robes and appears "here below" (18) in motley, enduring, like the fool, like the priest-poet, "many a brunt". His brunts finally have redemptive value, however, enabling him "to cancell sinne" (21-22). This example teaches humanity the ridiculous maxim of the fool's kingdom, that there is "life in death" ('Mortification' (35-36)). In 'The Quip', 'The Size' and 'The Pearl', the poet-speaker takes on as his own this foolish motto of dying to the standards of the world.

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<sup>39</sup> Downes (1983), pp. 1-2, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Ong, p. 148.

<sup>41</sup> Downes (1983), p. 112. Emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> Tuve, p. 49.

Such dying is not unexpected because, as the preceding chapters have discovered repeatedly, pain marks the experience of the priest-poet at all levels. There is pain in the tension between the priest-poets' two roles, and like fools for Christ's sake, their ambiguous position opens them to worldly scorn. Yet in this also they stand under the crucified Christ who was himself derided by the crowds and torn in two. Indeed, it is in following Christ through pain and brokenness that both their poetic and priestly callings become the most priestly. For, whether this brokenness comes from vocational agony, from ill health and thwarted ambition, or from sadness at the suffering in the world around them, it fits within the pattern of Christ's suffering on the cross and presented to God in Christ's "ever-living intercession for His people".<sup>43</sup> This is also evident in the priest's eucharistic duty. There, the act of fraction or breaking, central to all communion rites,<sup>44</sup> links Christ with the sufferings of his priest-poets and of his church. Scott affirms that

... what is tragically broken in life is taken up and absorbed into the great Eucharistic action of offering, consecration and communion, whereby the self-oblation of the Church becomes one with Christ's own oblation of Himself for our redemption.<sup>45</sup>

The priest-poet's poetic obsession with suffering thus finds hope in the eucharist's mysterious nexus of grief and grace. What Seward writes concerning the hope underlying "folly for Christ's sake" is also the hope of the eucharist and of the priest-poet's poetry. All three affirm "that God works through weakness, failure and suffering and that the way to true life and joy is the way of the cross".<sup>46</sup> That is the core of the priest-poet's hope, whether resolutely held, as in Herbert, discovered painfully, as in Hopkins, or yearned for faintly and wistfully, as in Thomas. Thus, despite their different degrees of hope, the ubiquity of eucharistic references in their poetry reflects how the eucharist embraces the stormy conflict of suffering, theology and art which they experience. Indeed, the practice of the eucharist involves curious similarities to the writing of poetry. Christ's initial command to practice communion ("do this in remembrance of me"), is an injunction to *poesis*;<sup>47</sup> to participation in an act of *making*, which, as Sidney insisted, is artistic creation. The priest-poet, in poetry and eucharist, shares in that creative action which centres around the brokenness of the world, the broken body of Christ and the strange life of grace which can flow from both. As Dix observes in his analysis of *The Shape of the Liturgy*, the

<sup>43</sup> *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, ed. by C.I. Scofield (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 988, with reference to Hebrews 9.14 and Hebrews 7.25.

<sup>44</sup> Dix, p. 48.

<sup>45</sup> Nathan A. Scott Jr., *The Broken Center: Studies in the Theological Horizon of Modern Literature* (New Haven and London: University of Yale Press, 1966), p. 141.

<sup>46</sup> Seward, p. 95.



eucharistic liturgy is a dramatic proceeding of taking, consecrating, breaking and sharing.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the poetry of the priest-poet involves, in similar fashion, the taking and consecrating of broken experience, shared with readers in the poetry of the cross.

For poets, too, are concerned with suffering. Edwards suggests that all dealings with words are marked by the pain of labour and toil.<sup>49</sup> Keble casts poetry as divine balsam for a wounded world, "solace to men sorely exercised in mind".<sup>50</sup> As the previous chapters show, when seeking "the poem/In the pain", writing sonnets "in blood",<sup>51</sup> and bleeding out the lines of a contract with God, Thomas, Hopkins and Herbert are working as poets, not just as priests. Coleridge, in his breathless attempt to define the secondary imagination in chapter 13 of the *Biographia Literaria* writes in terms which bring the poetic process and the eucharist to a similar point of brokenness and hope. The secondary imagination, he insists, "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify."<sup>52</sup> In the dissolution, the struggle, the wrestling with self-hood, with the world as it is, and as it should be, the poet knows that breaking, dissolution and dissipation are necessary if the joy of recreation is to be realised. Both priest and poet understand that wholeness, even the mere hope of wholeness, lies on the far side of fragmentation and isolation.

### *Torn in two*

Forsyth's comparison between the tensions inherent in the priest's ministry and the tensions of Christ's experience was quoted above in Chapter Five. Forsyth recognises that the tension in the minister's experience easily snaps him (he is "often rent asunder"), just as it broke Christ's heart, but in the ripping and tearing is known "the heart of God."<sup>53</sup> Forsyth is here evoking the synoptic gospels' accounts of the temple veil, torn at the moment of Christ's death:<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The Greek word is "poiete" (Luke 22.19, 1 Corinthians 11.24-25). See *The Englishman's Greek New Testament* (London: S. Bagster & Sons, 1877), pp. 227 and 456; Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 2nd edn (London: Dacre Press, 1945), p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Dix, p. 48.

<sup>49</sup> Edwards, pp. 11, 120 etc. "Writing . . . is laborious since it is part of Adam's labour" (p. 230).

<sup>50</sup> John Keble, *Lectures on Poetry*, trans. by Edward Kershaw Frances, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), vol II, p. 465.

<sup>51</sup> R.S. Thomas: 'Petition'; Hopkins, *To Bridges*, p. 219; Herbert, 'Obedience'.

<sup>52</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. by George Watson (London: J.M. Dent, 1975), p. 167.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Ramsey, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> Mark 15.37-38 (NRSV). See also Matthew 27.51; Luke 23.45.

Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

The Gospel authors do not dwell on the significance of this event. It is noted as part of the Passion story before the narrative moves on. Only in the Epistle to the Hebrews are the symbolic theological lessons of the temple curtain drawn out. The sacrificial self-offering of Jesus tears the temple curtain and opens the way to God:

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith . . .<sup>55</sup>

Frost summarises the background to this passage, in which the temple curtain divided the holy place of ordinary temple worship from the holy of holies ("the shrine of the invisible God"). Only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, did the high priest enter the holy of holies, "to the presence beyond the veil". But, says Frost,

By his death on the day of his perfect atonement for all sin, the Son of Man, our great high priest, though no priest of the order of Levi, ruptures the barrier between the sacred and the profane, the divine and the human, the transcendent and the incarnate, and leaves a breach through which ordinary men may storm into the sanctuary.<sup>56</sup>

In the moment of utter surrender, when divine nature submits to mortal death and evil appears to have triumphed, Christ in fact opens "a new and living way" to God through the veil of his flesh.<sup>57</sup> Through him and his sacrifice, there are no longer any barriers between the sacred and the profane. This is the experience of the priest-poet. Though torn in two, the priest-poets' broken experiences can, when viewed through the eucharist and poetry, re-call and re-affirm Christ's living way. Of course, they do not always live up to that calling, partly because the hope is the eschatological hope of the kingdom that is now and yet to come.<sup>58</sup> Yet, in life and in poetry, they respond to Christ's sacrificial self-offering, a response which is itself broken and sacrificial, thereby opening up to others an invitation to the promise of wholeness that lies on the living way to God.

Ann Griffiths, literary and spiritual hero to R.S. Thomas, uses the image of the torn curtain in one of her most famous hymn-poems. Perhaps Thomas has this in mind as well as scripture, when asking whether maybe, "alongside us, made invisible by only the thinnest of veils, is the heaven we seek?"<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Hebrews 10.19-22 (NRSV).

<sup>56</sup> David L. Frost, 'Liturgical Language from Cranmer to Series 3', in *The Eucharist Today*, ed. by R.C.D. Jasper (London: SPCK, 1974), pp. 142-167 (pp. 142-143).

<sup>57</sup> Hebrews 10.20.

<sup>58</sup> Compare Dix, pp. 256ff.

<sup>59</sup> R.S. Thomas, 'Where Do We Go From Here?', p. 120.

Flesh rots: instead, aflame, along with heaven's singers,  
 I shall pierce through the veil, into the land  
 Of infinite astonishment, the land  
 Of what was done at Calvary;  
 I shall look on what never can be seen, and still  
 Shall live, look on the one who died and who still lives  
 And shall; look in eternal jointure and communion,  
 Not to be parted.

I shall lift up the name that God  
 Sets out to be a mercy seat, a healing, and the veils,  
 And the imaginings and shrouds have gone, because  
 My soul stands now, his finished likeness,  
 Admitted now to share his secret, that his blood and hurt  
 Showed once, now I shall kiss the Son  
 And never turn away again. And never  
 Turn away.<sup>60</sup>

Of course, in the hoped for land of infinite astonishment beyond the veil, both the poet and the priest are redundant. There, presence replaces absence and mediation is complete. In the meantime, however, poet and priest live and die on this side of the mortal divide, where the truths of experience and the truths of theology require mediation and embodiment in poetry, liturgy, sermon and life. They must be shared to the priest-poet's parishioners, and to the parish of his readers. Following in the path of the God/Man Christ who rips open the veil to provide access to eternal rest, the priest-poet's presentation of the tearings, Sunderings and rifts which characterise his faith experience allows his readers to glimpse what he has discerned beyond the veil, just as the heavenly feast is glimpsed when he breaks the eucharistic bread in the company of the saints.

<sup>60</sup> From 'Hymn for the Mercy Seat', a free translation by Rowan Williams of a Welsh hymn by Ann Griffiths, in Rowan Williams, *After Silent Centuries*, (Oxford: The Perpetua Press, 1994), pp. 44-45.

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